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Evolution

WELCOME TO THE NEW GAME INFORMER

ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
andy@gameinformer.com

READ *my column or comment on this letter at gameinformer.com/mag or follow @GI_AndyMc*

This may sound crazy, but what you hold in your hands is the product of years' worth of work and research. The journey has not been an easy one, as change never comes easy. You have to examine what you do and how you think for every major and minor decision.

Earlier this year I thought we had found our new direction. I asked you for feedback, and the responses we received in return showed me that we were on the right track. All it took was making it all happen. The magazine couldn't just be a magazine – that much was clear. It needed to embrace what magazines do best: thoughtful analysis and reporting on the issues and trends that shape the video game industry.

But the discussions in the pages you read don't end here. We needed to add another dimension, which we found with our revamped gameinformer.com.

This isn't just a magazine redesign and website re-launch. One is not complete without the other. We strove to create a community where people who love games could meet, comment on the magazine, opine on the news and views of the day, interact with the editors, and even become editors themselves.

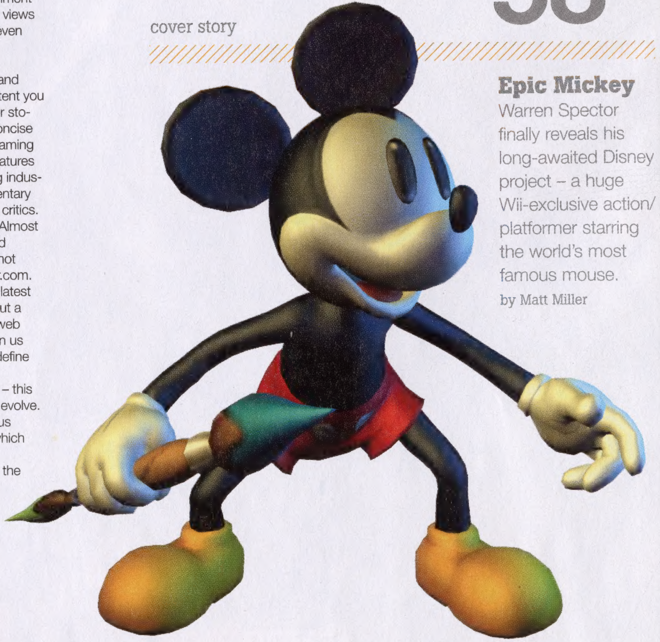
Simply put, we evolved.

The magazine is designed to be clean and easy to read, while still delivering the content you have grown to love: world exclusive cover stories revealing industry-defining games; concise reviews and previews that show where gaming is now and will be in the future; unique features and news that capture our ever-changing industry; and finally, views, humor, and commentary from our experienced staff of writers and critics.

That is, however, just the opening act. Almost every story in the magazine has an added dimension to be found online, but that's not the only reason to head to gameinformer.com. Online isn't just a destination to read the latest news, reviews, previews, and features, but a place we hope you call home. Our new web community gives gamers a chance to join us in exploring the culture and games that define our lives.

As you read this new issue, remember – this is just the beginning. We will continue to evolve. But I ask that you come along and help us create a gamer community the likes of which this world has never seen.

Enjoy the magazine and I'll see you on the site. Cheers.



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> – PlayStation The Official Magazine – October 2009

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> – PC Gamer – June 2009

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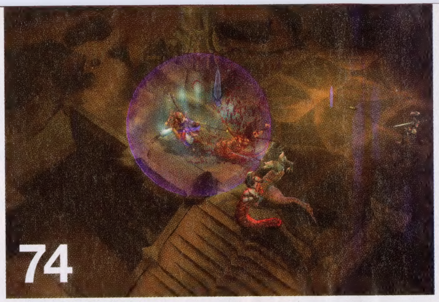

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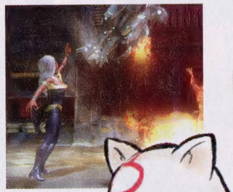

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BATMAN: ARKHAM ASYLUM REVIEWED INSIDE PG. 82
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Interviews With The Beatles ✿ A Journey To Abbey Road ✿ Our Exclusive Review
SEPTEMBER 2009

This month in Feedback, GI gets a redesign, someone dislikes a popular game, metascores face scrutiny, and a PS3 owner laments an early purchase.

COVER UP

I know that Andy was excited about the new cover design, but I'm just not feeling it. The logo looks like something a junior high student would draw on their notebook. It looks like consoles aren't the only part of the industry trying to appeal to the casual gamer – I just hope one of the editors designed it in their free time and Game Informer didn't actually pay someone.

Ben Hanfelder
Bay St. Louis, Mississippi

Don't worry, that funky logo on the cover of our The Beatles: Rock Band issue wasn't a sign of things to come with our redesign. It was just a one-time thing to go along with the featured era of Beatles history. If you want to see the new cover style that Andy was referencing, you should take another look at front of this issue; the cover, along with just about every section of the magazine, has undergone a drastic visual overhaul. We hope you like the new look, because we're not getting another one for a few years.

MOTION DISMISSED

I've been a loyal follower of video games since I was six years old. I was shocked to hear about Microsoft and Sony following Nintendo's lead and ditching their regular controls in favor of new motion-sensing mechanics. I can't stand motion controls! So, my question is: Will Microsoft and Sony ditch the traditional controller completely? I think a deep game needs a normal controller.

Joseph Francis
via email

It may seem like motion-sensing technology is taking over, but don't throw away your regular controllers yet. With the Wii's success, motion-based gameplay has grown rapidly, but hardcore games for serious gamers still retain more traditional control schemes. Series like Call of Duty: Modern Warfare, Final Fantasy, and Grand Theft Auto will probably always recognize and accommodate their core audiences. Will you continue to see games with simple motion-based controls? Yes. Will that become the only way to play? We don't see it happening.

MERCY KILLING

The opinion piece entitled "Why Some Franchises Need To Accept Death" nailed the point. It puts the spotlight on titles like Halo, Need for Speed, and especially popular sports games like Madden. Eventually people will stop buying the same thing time after time, year after year.

John Clawson
via email

Ben gave me an odd vibe with his article in issue 197; it sounds like he thinks that as soon as a game loses its original flair that the developers should just stop trying. Developing games is a never-ending battle. Sometimes companies need to rethink the formula and change it so it feels fresh. If you kill a struggling franchise, it can never get better again.

David Britton
via email

I was very pleased to see Ben Reeves' editorial addressing the pervasive sequel crisis in gaming. Certainly it's understandable that, for developers, making games is a matter of the bottom line. Just as understandably, an already successful brand is a safer venture than new, untested quantities. However, I see no reason why artistic integrity can't walk in step with financial success. Why can't developers just make the game they want to make rather than worrying whether it can be built into a franchise?

Glenn Morrow
via email

DON'T ANSWER

Someone please explain to me the big deal about World of Warcraft. My friend insisted on me giving the free trial a go... and I was disappointed. To me, it seemed like a stereotypical fantasy game with hours upon hours of grinding. The questing is just "find this" or "kill this many goblins." I can't imagine people paying 15 bucks a month for something this repetitive! Does it get better as it goes on? Because at this point, my money should be spent elsewhere. I hate to bash, but seriously, what's the big deal with this game?

Chris M.
Wyckoff, NJ

The phrase "Someone please explain to me the big deal about [insert game here]," is a trap. No amount of explanation will

Out of Context

"The answers to all of life's questions must be contained somewhere within Left 4 Dead 2."

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Video games may be our favorite hobby, but it's a business. It's big business for the people that make the games, and it's also a business for the media who review and rate video games. Whether or not you write for a magazine or website, we all have opinions about how good or bad a title is. But to some it's more than an opinion; it could be life or death. The competition is tougher than ever today, and not only making, but selling a successful video game makes and breaks the fates of developers large and small.

CRITICAL MASS

Do Companies Put Too Much Stock In Metacritic?

UNDER THE HOOD

IT'S NOT JUST A GAME

DISCERNING VOICES

"It is a big deal. Everything's set to one-click to go the Metacritic page for the game you're working on, and people are constantly F5-ing and updating. You do a game that's rated in the '70s and you feel pretty bad. It's not a great feeling."

▲ ***Didn't read the feature about metascores in issue 197? You can find that article and many others at Game Informer Online, where you can read up on what you missed from previous issues.***

change the mind of anyone who has already decided that a game isn't worth the hype it receives. The more popular a game is – like World of Warcraft or Halo – the more people contend that it doesn't deserve its success. The dissenters aren't necessarily wrong; everyone is entitled to their own opinion. On the other hand, be wary of anyone who asks you to justify your love of a game they don't like – they don't have anything to lose in the scenario.

SO META

I was reading your article "Critical Mass" in issue 197 and was appalled by the use of scoring in the gaming industry. I understand that companies often use them to make decisions, but to me they are completely useless. I have never purchased a game based on its score, regardless of the source. I base my purchasing on how well I personally like the game. I have played games with crappy controls or cameras (which caused them to receive low scores) because the story blew me away. Everyone has different ideas about how a game should be scored; an average of two opinions doesn't accurately reflect either one.

Audrey Blevins
via email

In your article "Critical Mass", you talked about websites that create a score for a game based on a compilation of dozens and dozens of other reviews. As a somewhat hardcore gamer, I have never heard of these metascores, and I generally only value GI reviews and word of mouth, which makes it really hard to believe that game publishers and developers would become so obsessed with these scores. I understand that seeing your game get a good score is exciting and gives a sense of accomplishment and pride, but not creating a sequel based on these aggregated scores seems like a crude attempt to weed out the risky titles.

Kurosh Golshan
San Marcos, CA

We're just as disappointed as the developers at the way publishers are irresponsibly leveraging metascores. The process puts the spotlight on outlier reviews, which makes it easy to blame one source (like Game Informer) for ruining a game's chances at hitting its meta-target. The real problem isn't individual reviews; it's the way metascores are used to drive development, affecting everything from a game's feature set to the development team's bonus money. A metascore is a number divorced from context, and simply represents a title's average critical reception. It isn't the best way to gauge a title's overall success.

ALL ABOUT TIMING

I own a PS3 40GB, which I bought in May 2008. Back then I paid $399 for it. I have recently seen that Sony is having another price cut on the PS3 and the newer models have an increase in storage space. My question is this: As someone who bought the PS3 before these price cuts and newer models, is there any way I can be reimbursed, or am I just a victim of buying the PS3 at the wrong time?

Asad Khan
Chicago, IL

You're pretty much out of luck. Don't think of yourself as a victim, though. Gamers who waited to buy a slim PS3 are just now starting to play games that you've had for over a year. So, your extra $100 wasn't wasted – it was just a premium you paid to have timely access to PS3-exclusive gems like Metal Gear Solid 4, LittleBigPlanet, Uncharted, and Infamous. We hope that helps ease the sting.

NAME THAT GAME

I've been wracking my brain (and the Internet) for months now trying to dig up an old PC title. The first one was great, and there was an equally fun and original sequel, but I cannot remember or find the title to this game. Can your collective knowledge dig this up for me? Here's what I remember:

- Set in the 1960s, starring a British secret agent
- Female heroine, complete with a Bob cut and knee-high boots. Think Barbara Feldon as Agent 99
- Bright decor and (awesome!) knee-high go-go boots on almost all the ladies in the game

Most Corrected Mistake:

Many readers pointed out that, in issue 197, we accidentally ran a picture of the Xbox title Black in the developer tips for The Conduit. No, you don't get a prize for pointing it out.

Things We Learned

- Monster Hunter has a devoted (and very vocal) following.
- People are willing to play a below-average game if it means they get to control Final Fantasy characters.

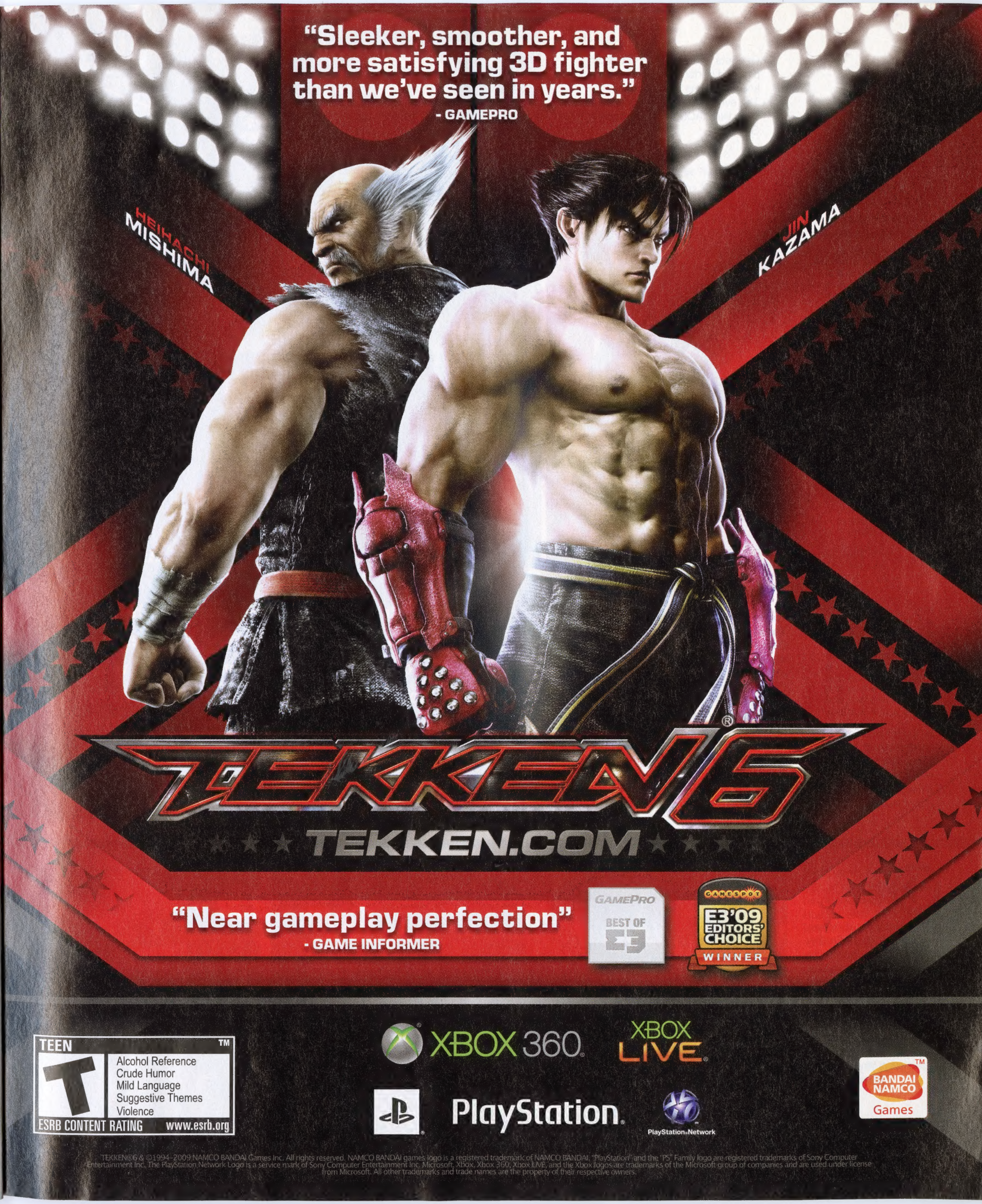
- A Guitar Hero exclusively featuring your favorite band would be the best-selling game of all time. Even when that band is Blink-182. Ugh.

gi spy

(Left) THQ's Bryan Williams shows Ben and new GI editor Dan Ryckert who's boss. Not pictured: The trip to the emergency room that followed **(Right)** Sony head Kaz Hirai toasts to the success of Square Enix's Final Fantasy XIII at the game's launch party in Japan

CANDID PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

GI SPY
continued on page 12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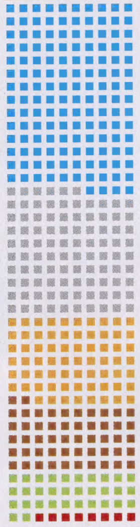
- Gadgets include a coin, a bobby pin, and perfume bottles full of knock-out gas
- The evil enemy enterprise is something like KAOS from the original Get Smart

Anonymous
via email

You're thinking of No One Lives Forever. The stylish FPS/espionage title featured Cate Archer as a secret agent trying to take down H.A.R.M., an evil organization predictably bent on world domination. Monolith Productions – the minds behind the more recent F.E.A.R. and Condemned franchises – developed the game, along with a sequel and the sub-par spin-off called Contract J.A.C.K. Be careful if you decide to pick this one up again; first-person shooters tend to age poorly.

On Your Mind



- 🟦 Console Failure Rates **36%**
- ▨ Motion Controls **24%**
- 🟧 Price Cuts **17%**
- 🟫 No Split-Screen **13%**
- 🟩 Hardcore Wii Games **8%**
- 🟥 Zombies **2%**

An Early Grave

In your countdown of the top 10 games of E3, your write-up of The Last Guardian reveals that Team Ico has planned that the creature will die at the end of the game. Thanks so much for ruining that for me.

Piotr Sepski
Asheville, NC

Rest easy, Piotr – we don't know for sure whether or not The Last Guardian's story involves the death of the strange chimera beast. However, anyone who has played either Ico or Shadow of the Colossus knows that the developer has an affinity for manipulating gamers' emotions. We hope the creature pulls through, but we're preparing for the worst just in case.

gallery

Enter the Game Informer Reader Art Contest. All you need to do is draw, paint, scratch, spit, or carve the best darn art you can think of and send it to us. Please include your name, phone number, and return address. If you're the monthly winner, we'll feature your work in GI and you'll receive a video game prize from the Game Informer vault. All entries become the property of Game Informer and can't be returned.

Send to:

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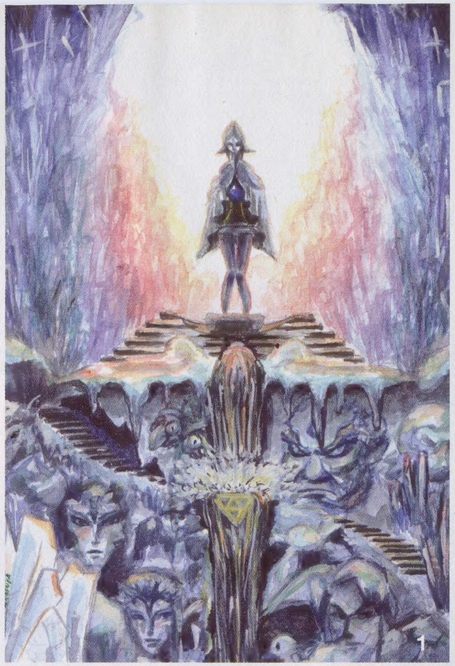
WINNER **1 Anna Krasner** There's a Master Sword and a bunch of faces hidden in the picture…but if that's your thing, you should probably subscribe to *Highlights* instead **2 Christtian Mazza** Why do meetings of the Chainsaw Fan Club always result in collarbone slicing? You'll never get anything done that way, guys! **3 Adriana Smith** Kefka taunts the countless suckers who bought Dissidia: Final Fantasy **4 Jacob Rangel** Sorry, but the "It's not murder if they're zombies" excuse doesn't hold up in court **5 Nathan Gantt** We didn't believe it existed, but we now possess the only piece of Elebits fan art in the world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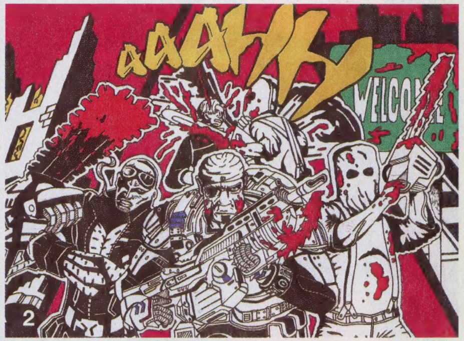
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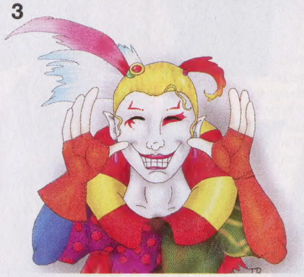

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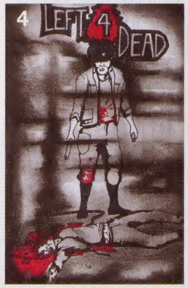

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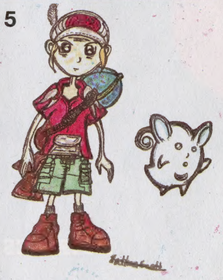
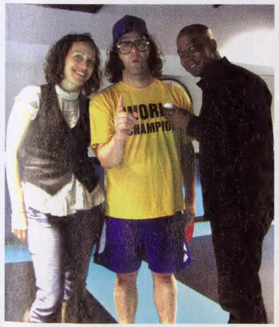


GI SPY

continued from page 11

(Left) Matt shows I/O Interactive's Kim Krogh and Sandbox Strat's Rob Fleischer the delights of the Minnesota State Fair – Texas Tater Twisters (deep fried hot dogs on a stick surrounded by a huge spiral French fry, covered in spices: a delicious treat!) **(Right)** Later on, I/O's Karsten Lund and Krogh took a tour of Minneapolis' Mill District by Segway

TEXAS TATER DOGS



(Left) Game Informer's east coast ad sales director Suzanne Lang and Kevin Christian, associate media director at Tangible Media, got to challenge *30 Rock's* Judah Friedlander to a hectic game of ping-pong. (Apparently, Judah is really good at ping pong) **(Right)** Ben hangs in Cambridge, England with Team Ninja cofounders Nina Kristensen, Tameen Antoniades, and Mike Ball

connect

The head of a life-size Gundam statue on display at Namco Bandai's TGS booth

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Tokyo Game Show 2009

A Subdued Convention Illustrates A Troubled Japanese Gaming Industry

By Matt Helgeson with contributions from Jeff Cork, Bryan Vore, and Matthew Kato

At Zest Cantina, a western-themed bar in the trendy Shibuya district of Tokyo, a crowd of journalists and video game industry insiders packed onto the club's dance floor for an invitation-only Capcom party. The event followed the second day of the Tokyo Game Show 2009, and the partygoers had already helped themselves to the free beer and open kiosks of Dead Rising 2's single-player.

At 8PM, after a boisterous introduction from a local radio personality (dressed in a fur coat and accompanied by two models), Mega Man creator Keiji Inafune took the stage to welcome the attendees.

"I got a quick question for you all. What did you think of TGS this year?" said Inafune, quickly adding, "Be honest. Did it suck or was it great?"

Someone from the crowd yelled, "Do we really have to be honest?"

"Personally," Inafune continued, "When I looked around at all the different games at the TGS event floor, I said, 'Man, Japan is over. We're done; our game industry is finished.' But just so you don't think the game industry is finished, Capcom is doing our best. I wanted to invite you to this party to show you that there are still some kick-ass games out there coming from Japan."

They were harsh words, and all the more cutting coming from one of the most successful and respected Japanese game producers in the history of the industry. He certainly wasn't alone in his assessment of the times. Later on, outside of the bar, Takeshi Uechi, a writer for the legendary Japanese weekly gaming magazine *Famitsu*, commented, "Japanese companies only make games for nerds and girls."

While the crowds still came and the cosplayers still posed for pictures, this year's Tokyo Game Show felt like a shadow of what was once the world's premier video game event. Behind all the booming speakers and blinking video screens, it was hard to ignore the signs: The Japanese game industry is struggling to compete with Western developers and publishers. The place that many consider the land of video games has now fallen far behind the European and U.S. markets. This reality was reflected in a show that many longtime attendees we spoke with called the smallest and least-exciting TGS in memory.

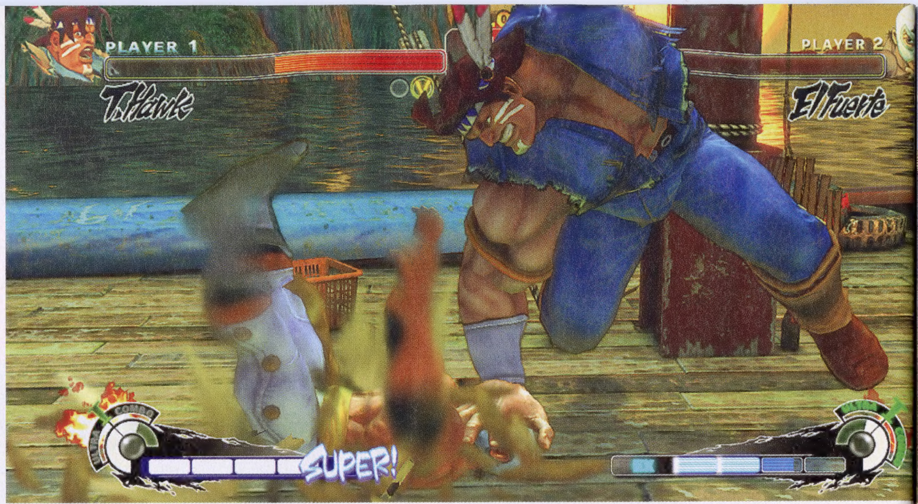
Changing Times

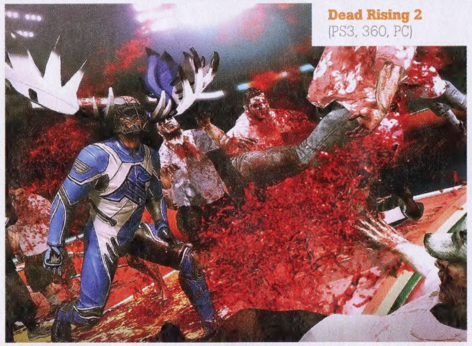
Walking around the show floor, it was apparent that the grand spectacles of previous Tokyo Game Shows may well be a thing of the past. While many of the bigger Japanese and Western companies still had large, elaborate booths, it was clear that participation and spending by many Japanese companies was down sharply. Several prominent companies that had booths last year were completely absent, including SNK Playmore, Marvelous, Hudson, and FromSoftware. Large portions of the show floor, especially at each end of the convention center, were vacant. Many of the booths in front were filled by minor peripheral manufacturers, trade organizations, and design schools that would be relegated to the far reaches of a show like E3.

Despite the subdued mood, Microsoft continued to show its commitment to the Japanese market, using the show to court interest in its

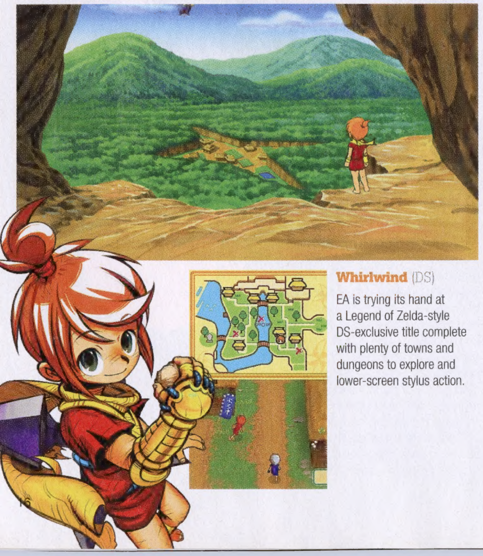
Super Street Fighter IV (PS3, 360)

It wasn't on the show floor, but Capcom's Super Street Fighter IV was tucked away in a hotel suite near Tokyo Game Show. The follow up, which will release at retail with a reduced price, adds eight new characters, including T. Hawk, Dee Jay, and a woman named Juri who fights using Tae Kwon Do. The game also features new openings and endings for each character. Add in a spectator mode, a few more online enhancements, and much more, and it could end up being one of the best fighting-game bargains around.





Dead Rising 2 (PS3, 360, PC)



Whirlwind (DS)

EA is trying its hand at a Legend of Zelda-style DS-exclusive title complete with plenty of towns and dungeons to explore and lower-screen stylus action.

ambitious Project Natal motion controller. Natal was shown to journalists and industry professionals behind closed doors, focusing on the handball minigame Ricochet and Burnout Paradise demos that had been shown at E3, as well as two Japanese games, Beautiful Katamari and Space Invaders Extreme, overlaid with Natal controls. Microsoft, which has enjoyed slow but steadily improving 360 sales in Japan, clearly views Natal as a way to make inroads into a market that has proved tough to crack for the company.

Microsoft demonstrated this Japanese support for Natal by hosting a roundtable discussion that featured three of Japan's most high profile developers, Metal Gear icon Hideo Kojima, Keiji Inafune, and Sega and Super Monkey Ball creator Toshihiro Nagoshi. Throughout the presentation the three seemed very enthusiastic about the possibilities inherent in Natal, whether through gameplay or by allowing a greater emotional connection with players.

Capcom's Inafune even speculated that Natal could help the people who use it with their real lives, commenting how Natal's controller-less system could help awkward Japanese gamers with their body language and even advance society as a whole. Kojima was characteristically unconventional in his views, mentioning Natal's application outside of gaming in everything from interactive ads to elevator cameras that would alert the police to possible criminal attacks, as well as potential medical uses. Kojima was impressed enough by Natal to take a sly dig at Nintendo, predicting that the technology would be more than a "silly fad."

On the software side, Microsoft also continued to push its big franchises on Japanese consumers, who seem to be becoming more enthusiastic about more traditionally Western-focused titles like Halo 3: ODST and Crackdown 2 (called Riot Act 2 in Japan). Journalists were treated to a new level of the long-delayed Alan Wake, which looked in fine form.

Missed Opportunities

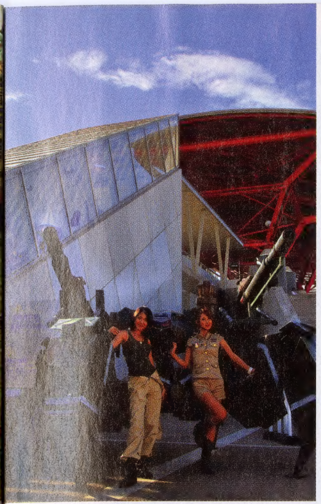
For the first time in a while, Sony actually had good news to report with regards to PlayStation 3 sales. At his TGS keynote address, Sony's Kaz Hirai revealed that, in the three weeks that had passed since the release of the new, lower-priced PlayStation 3 Slim, the company had sold one million units of the new hardware. According to Hirai, those numbers represent the fastest sales period for the console since the holiday 2007 shopping season.

Unfortunately, this good news was buried in a rambling address that proved long on corporate cheerleading and short on exciting games or tangible announcements. While a few notable game videos were shown, including new footage of The Last Guardian and Echochrome 2, the games portion of the presentation mostly focused on high-profile PS3 titles like Uncharted 2: Among Thieves and Ratchet & Clank Future: A Crack in Time.

Still, there were a few bits of new information. Hirai showed a newer version of the Sony motion controller, which looked more refined in design than the one demonstrated at E3. Hirai reiterated that it would be released in the spring of 2010, and confirmed some upcoming and previously released titles that will be compatible with the controller such as Echochrome 2, Pain, and Flower. Additionally, he hinted that 3D gaming would be a priority for Sony as a corporation moving forward, on both the consumer electronics and gaming side.

Later, Sony held another press conference that offered a little more in terms of excitement regarding the upcoming controller. Capcom's Jun Takeuchi demonstrated a new expanded re-release of Resident Evil 5 that will ship in March and use the motion controller. Sony also demonstrated the motion controller in use with its own breakout hit LittleBigPlanet in a co-op demo that had one staffer using a DualShock and one using the motion control wand.

Unfortunately, a lot of the conference's impact was dulled by the fact that many in the Western press did not receive invites and no English translation was provided for attendees. It was an odd decision that seemed at odds with the strong lineup of first party games, like God of War III and Heavy Rain, which Sony showed on the convention floor.



Setting in the East?

As the console makers continued to compete for mindshare, the third parties struggled to create any real sense of excitement. Companies like Namco Bandai and Koei Tecmo showed off aging franchises (like Tekken and Dynasty Warriors, respectively) and Japan-only obscurities, while more Western-focused giants like Konami, Square Enix, Electronic Arts, and Ubisoft showed off known commodities such as Metal Gear Solid: Peace Walker (see page 88 for more), Final Fantasy XIII, and Assassin's Creed II.

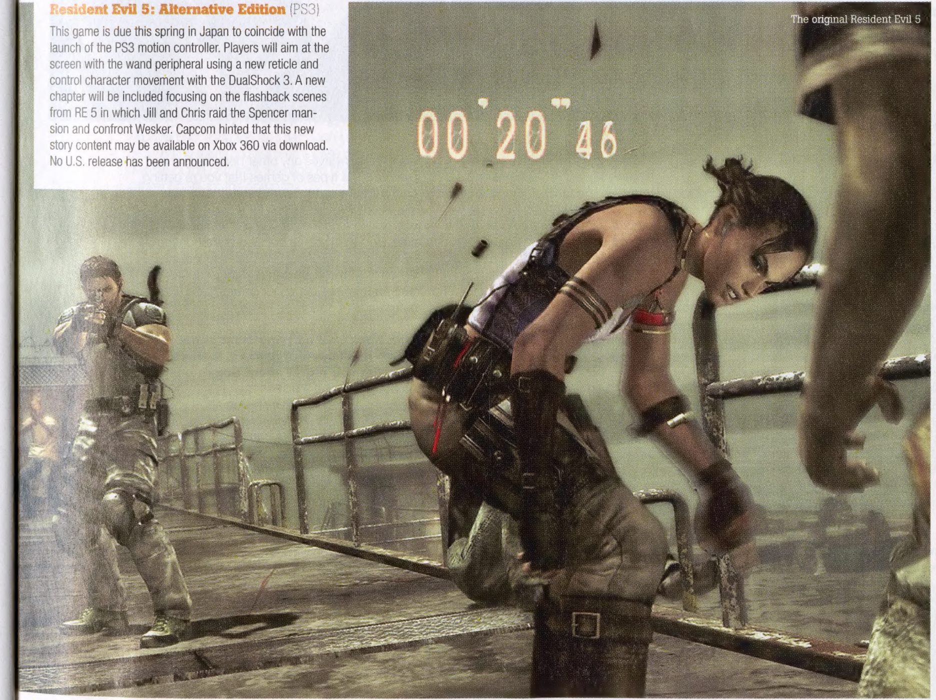
However, there were exceptions to the general sense of malaise. Capcom, despite Keiji Inafune's low opinion of the current industry, seems to be the only Japanese company that can still compete with the West in offering a broad and diverse slate of titles with high-powered production values. Inafune's Lost Planet 2 looked like one of the company's strongest titles in years (turn to page 83 for more), and the aforementioned Dead Rising 2 also impressed, showcasing gonzo action and an intriguing new, WWE-influenced multiplayer mode called "Terror is Reality." Capcom also turned heads with Okamiden for the DS (see our preview on page 89) and debuted Super Street Fighter IV, The Last Ranker (PSP), and Ghost Trick (DS).

While the overall vibe of TGS 2009 was more dispiriting than expected, it would be a mistake to write a premature epitaph for the Japanese gaming industry. Walking around areas like Akihabara, the passion that many Japanese feel for gaming is still readily apparent. The site of a five-story Taito arcade packed with teenagers late on a Monday night is proof enough that there are still legions of gamers in the country. And, it's worth noting that Nintendo, the most successful company in the industry, foregoing the show has the effect of making the industry there seem smaller than it really is.

As long as game creators like Keiji Inafune and Hideo Kojima reside there, Japan will continue to be an important part of game culture. Still, walking the show floor, it was disturbing to note just how many titles seemed more rooted in video games' past than their future. A source closely tied to a Japanese developer expressed concerns with the ability of Japanese companies to create and invest in new IP. He attributed it to Japanese companies' inherent conservatism, saying that once sales started to dip, their natural reaction was to pull back on the investments they were making in new development. Add in the fact that many were late in jumping in to next-gen development, and you have a serious gap in production values compared to the games created by Western companies. Aside from a handful of high-profile titles, the proof of his words was all over the Makuhari Messe, the convention center that hosts the Tokyo Game Show. It was enough to make one question just how appropriate the slogan of this year's show – "Game, It's So Energetic!" – really was. ◆

Resident Evil 5: Alternative Edition (PS3)

This game is due this spring in Japan to coincide with the launch of the PS3 motion controller. Players will aim at the screen with the wand peripheral using a new reticle and control character movement with the DualShock 3. A new chapter will be included focusing on the flashback scenes from RE 5 in which Jill and Chris raid the Spencer mansion and confront Wesker. Capcom hinted that this new story content may be available on Xbox 360 via download. No U.S. release has been announced.


The original Resident Evil 5

DataFile

No UMD Transfer for PSP Go

Sony has decided not to allow the transfer of any UMD games from the current PSP to the downloadable-only PSP Go due to what the company says are legal and technical reasons. Sony is offering a rewards program that would allow anyone who owns a UMD game to download three free games – but only in the U.K.

Gran Turismo 5 Shares Date/Details

Developer Polyphony Digital revealed the Japanese release date for GT 5: March 2010. We're intrigued by the fact that the game and Gran Turismo for PSP will link up, allowing the cars you've earned in the PSP title to instantly unlock in the PS3 game.

Capcom's Ghost Trick Debuts

レディを助けるためには、
彼女自身の"協力"が必要だ。

The original creator of the Ace Attorney series, Shu Takumi, is working on a new DS game tentatively titled Ghost Trick. Protagonist Sissel is killed at the beginning of the game and must possess inanimate objects to save others and find out why he was murdered. The combination of strange story, unique gameplay, and surprisingly fluid animation has this on our one-to-watch list for 2010.

news

In the Hot Seat

GI Grills the Execs

We ask bigwigs from Microsoft, Sony, and Nintendo some tough questions about where they're going and where they've been. Sit back, grab some popcorn, and enjoy the show.

Interviews by Matthew Kato

PETER DILLE
Sony
Senior vice president, marketing and PlayStation Network

Is the price cut for the PS3 too little too late?
No way. We're seeing a fantastic reaction to the price drop, and we know it's something that PlayStation nation has been waiting for. I'm seeing a lot of signs that our momentum is just getting started and our competitors' seems to be waning.

Should it have happened sooner?
No. We get a lot of questions on our pricing strategy, and what we've been saying for a long, long time is that at Sony we believe in 10-year product life cycles. I think a lot of times people hear that as spin, but that's the way we look at the business. So, the notion that just a little bit into the third year is "too little, too late" is kind of – no offense – it's a crazy question, because we really are just getting started. We've always said that it's a marathon not a sprint, and we're very confident that we'll be in our rightful place at the top of the heap when all is said and done.

Do you think that if the initial launch of the PS3 hadn't been delayed, you'd be beating Microsoft or even the Wii in console sales at this moment?
At the launch of the PlayStation 3 we were supply constrained. There were some things that could have gone more smoothly from a product flow perspective, and look, there's no doubt that launching a system at the price point we launched at had never been done before. Many gamers were convinced it was a machine they had to have, but many of them were waiting out until the price drop came. We've launched platforms when we've been first before, and we've launched platforms when we've not been first before, and in both cases the results were the same. So, we're confident that we're going to end up on top when all is said and done.

What can you do to shift the third-party software tide away from Microsoft? For instance, EA has just announced its sales numbers for this year's Madden, and more people are buying it on the 360.
The tide is shifting, and the data you just quoted points to it exactly. If you had a two-to-one hardware install base advantage and you were Microsoft, wouldn't you hope to be seeing a two-to-one advantage on a title like Madden? And the numbers were what? It was 900,000 for 360 and 670,000 for PS3. So, we look at this like, "this gap is shrinking considerably." Now lets talk about a title you've probably played, Batman: Arkham Asylum. We're actually exactly on par with them with [Microsoft's] same install base advantage. So, the tide is turning.

Can the PSP stack up with the iPhone considering the iPhone is making more moves into gaming and also is wildly popular with its other functions as well?
You're a gaming journalist, and if you're interested in gaming, the PSP doesn't just stack up, it really dwarves any other portable gaming platform. The types of games that you're getting on the iPhone are small and sort of diversionary, where if you're waiting for a bus and you're not making a phone call you can kill some time. But when you've got God of War on the PSP and you see what Gran Turismo looks like on PSP, these are games with a capital "G." And, it's not just about games. It's a total entertainment device.

With Xbox Live carrying most of the online mindshare of gamers, is there anything you regret about Sony's online strategy for the PS3?
I'm not sure that we have any regrets. If you look at PlayStation Network registrations, they are through the roof. The consumer appetite to get the PS3 online when they get the product is close to broadband penetration in the United States, so people fully understand the benefit of online gaming, of downloadable content, and it's part and parcel of the PlayStation 3 experience. I think if you stack up the things that you can do on the PlayStation Network versus the competition, it's very close, and yet [Microsoft has] been at it much longer than we have, so we regard it as a great experience and it's something that we get feedback from the consumer, and they love the fact that it's free.

Microsoft has shifted its first-party software focus from new IP like Fable, Gears of War, and Crackdown, to sequels like Fable 2, Gears of War 2, etc. Where are the new first-party software franchises from Microsoft?
We still have a lot of work going on in new IP. For example, there are definitely things that you already know about; things like Alan Wake are still to debut. You look at things we've talked about around Project Natal as well, especially something like Milo from Peter Molyneux, which is very ambitious, very new. And while it's not exactly an announced title per se, we have a lot of work going on in terms of trying to develop new IP that both takes advantage of Natal as well as Live on Xbox 360.

Was it a mistake to let former partners like Bungie and Bizarre Creations leave the Microsoft Game Studios fold?
Well, if you're talking about Bungie, they're still a partner, and I don't think that's been anything but a success. Our partnership with Bungie continues. They're developing Halo 3: ODST and Halo Reach as well, so we have a great working relationship with Bungie, and I expect that to continue for many years to come. Bizarre Creations was not owned by us, Bizarre Creations was an independent company, and that was a situation where Activision wanted to acquire the company and we weren't in a position where we thought that was the best thing for us. That wasn't a case of us letting them go as it was a case of the owners of the company wanting to chart a different path for the company.

Is Microsoft in the position where it has to come out with its next console early in order to blunt the momentum being gained by Sony's PlayStation 3?
Well, I guess how I'd answer is that we feel incredibly good about our competitive position. We continue to outsell the PlayStation 3, we're the only current-generation console that is up year-over-year through the first eight months of 2009, and we continue to add more and more value. Of course, then we have Project Natal on the horizon. That to us is going to be a game changer and the good news for 360 customers and for us, is that Project Natal is compatible with every 360 that's been made and sold and will be sold. I think it's way too early for people to think about who's going to win this generation. I think this generation will be longer and bigger than people think.

Natal's motion control functions put it in the same mindspace as the Wii and its motion controls. Of course, the Wii has been a huge success. Are you going up against a juggernaut?
First of all, you have to congratulate Nintendo and acknowledge the success they've had with the Wii. I think it's good for the industry, and as far as we're concerned it's Nintendo and Microsoft that are driving most of the excitement in the industry. Bringing more people into the industry and showing them what's possible is a good thing. Now that said, we believe that Project Natal goes far and away beyond what the Wii enables.

Is there anything about the Xbox 360's manufacturing or components that you regret in terms of the Red Ring of Death problem?
Well, clearly, anybody would wish that that hadn't occurred, but what I'm most proud of is that the company took a very big, not inexpensive step to stand behind the product and ensure that customers would ultimately have a great experience. While there are detractors out there who will continue to raise that issue, I think that what you'll find for the most part is that we get a lot of kudos from people because of the way we stood behind the product, we extended the warranty – and in a completely unprecedented fashion – so that at the end of the day, customers could feel secure in terms of the quality of the product.

SHANE KIM
Microsoft
Corporate vice president, strategy and business development, interactive entertainment business

Just before our interview with Mr. Kim, Microsoft announced that he was retiring after 10 years with the company.

Both Sony and Microsoft have motion control technologies on the horizon that are arguably more advanced than that which the Wii uses. Are they stealing your thunder?
Well for Nintendo, motion control is a reality for us today. We really set the agenda and the standard in precision motion controls. It started with the launch of the Wii and the Wii remote, and we took it up a notch with the launch of Wii Sports Resort and Wii MotionPlus. As [Nintendo president] Mr. Iwata has stated, the types of technologies that others are now looking at for their future motion sensor accessories were really among the technologies that we reviewed early on, and we believe that our current offering with the accelerometer and the gyroscope now in Wii MotionPlus are the accessories that offer the best entertainment experience to the greatest number of players.

Non-traditional gamers like parents and grandparents have shown an interest in the Wii, but are they just transient gamers who can't be relied upon to buy the next Nintendo systems?
Not at all. One of the things that we're committed to and that we see is that we've taken people who never imagined themselves to be a video game player and we brought them in through more casual games, and now we're seeing them adopting gaming whole-heartedly. We see a lot of consumers who were introduced to video games through Brain Age are now finding that Professor Layton has that same addictive, brain-teasing quality but offers even more in the way of gameplay. And I imagine that those same consumers, once they get exposed to the new Zelda game, will find out that the puzzle solving in Zelda is really a great challenge and a lot of fun.

At this year's E3, Nintendo's software showcase had plenty of upcoming titles for hardcore gamers. Will satiating this type of gamer be a focus for Nintendo from now on?
Nintendo is committed to games for everyone. This has really been a fun year for us, to have games like Punch-Out!!, New Super Mario Bros., and Zelda. But we're also seeing that third parties are acknowledging the power of the huge installed base on Wii. So if you look at titles like Dead Space: Extraction and Resident Evil: The Darkside Chronicles, we believe that the pipeline for games for experienced gamers is getting to be very robust and will continue to be so.

With the low sales of Grand Theft Auto: Chinatown Wars on the DS and MadWorld on the Wii, are Mature-rated games on Nintendo platforms just not possible?
Oh, I don't think so at all. I think strong games will have strong sales, and one of the things too is that these games can have really long tails. That it's not just a matter of looking at the first month of sales data.

Is that the case with Chinatown Wars and MadWorld?
I don't have the sales numbers in front of me, but we've certainly continued to see sales on those titles month over month.

Third-party Wii titles often don't fare as well as Nintendo first-party titles. Is Nintendo doing anything to help third parties?
One of the things that we've been committed to is working with third parties to help them understand that it's all about taking advantage of the unique interface of our hardware. I think that now, on the Wii for example, there are something like 18 titles that have sold more than one million units since launch. [Dunaway clarified that she believed that of those 18, more than 10 were third-party games – ed.]

Is Nintendo concerned about some of the low-quality third-party games out for the Wii?
I think the average scores of titles have improved every year since the Wii has launched. I think that as people are getting more comfortable with the technology, they are creating better and better games.

Could Nintendo be doing better with its online strategy if the commitment to it had been there from the start?
Satisfaction just isn't part of our vocabulary. So whether you're talking about online strategy or selling hardware of creating great games, we're always striving to do more to bring more fun experiences to more consumers.

CAMMIE DUNAWAY
Nintendo
Executive vice president, sales and marketing

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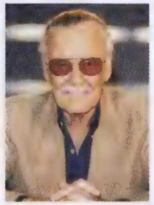
> "Nobody can produce and market franchises better than Disney, and nobody has the extensive library of characters that would make great franchises that Marvel has."



Stan Lee,
Marvel legend and
chairman emeritus

The Marvel & Disney Team-Up

Current Deals Still in Place

by Matthew Kato

Marvel superheroes have served a variety of publishers. Activision, Sega, and Capcom are just a few companies that Marvel tapped recently to create comic-based games. Now, however, Marvel has a single master – Disney. The Walt Disney Company recently agreed to acquire the comic book publisher for $4 billion. The deal is still pending shareholder votes and other approvals.

Marvel has several licensing deals already in place with numerous video game partners, and Disney says that it intends to respect these contracts. Disney has its own game publishing arm – Disney Interactive Studios – but the full licensing integration of these two companies will have to wait until Marvel's current deals expire. "What's nice about this," explained Disney CEO Robert Iger in a conference call, "is that as some of these deals near expiration we have the luxury of at that time considering what's best for the company, both from a financial perspective and a quality perspective and an exposure perspective."

Iger, however, says that Disney won't be in a rush to take everything Marvel has and bring it under the Disney umbrella. "[Marvel has] what we see as smart licensing agreements with some of the best video game manufacturers in the business. While we have been steadily moving in a vertically integrated direction, we don't rule out the possibility of a blend of licensed games as well as self-produced and self-distributed [games]."

Up until now, Disney Interactive Studios has been relatively quiet as a publisher, primarily releasing titles based on its own kids' movies. However, internal studios Junction Point and Black Rock point the way forward for the publisher with Epic Mickey and racer Split Second, respectively (see our feature on Epic Mickey on page 58). Disney also recently acquired Wideload Games – the Chicago developer founded by Bungie co-founder Alex Seropian. How Disney Interactive uses these and other studios in conjunction with its new Marvel properties should prove to be in an interesting adventure.

Comic Contracts

As it stands, Marvel has several video game licensing deals that are still in effect, including multiyear deals with THQ and Sega, a deal through 2017 with Activision, and an agreement with Gazillion for Marvel MMOs that expires in 2019. Here is a list of some of the recent and upcoming Marvel video games, licenses, and their publisher/developer partners.

- **Marvel Ultimate Alliance 2** (Activision/Vicarious Visions)
- **X-Men Origins: Wolverine** (Activision/Raven Software)
- **Spider-Man** (Activision/multi)
- **The Punisher: No Mercy** (Zen Studios for PSN)
- **Marvel vs. Capcom 2** (Capcom/multi)
- **Iron Man 2** (Sega/Sega)
- **Marvel Super Hero Squad** (THQ/multi)
- **Marvel Universe MMO** (Gazillion/Gargantuan)
- **Captain America** (Sega/TBA)
- **Incredible Hulk** (Sega/TBA)
- **Thor** (Sega/TBA)

Print & Film

It's too early to know exactly how Marvel's comics and movies will be affected by this deal with Disney (and what Disney/Marvel comic crossovers we may see), but Joe Quesada, Marvel Comics editor-in-chief, doesn't expect any major changes in the content of Marvel's books. In his column on the website Comic Book Resources, Quesada said that Disney CEO Bob Iger "wants Marvel to be Marvel in the same way that Pixar remains Pixar. We have our culture, it has been successful for us, and he wants to preserve that."

Speaking of Pixar, what's the possibility of seeing a Pixar film with Marvel characters? Pixar's chief creative officer John Lasseter has already met with Marvel, and everyone is apparently "very excited." Until something emerges from the pair, Marvel's movie sector, Marvel Studios, will continue with upcoming Iron Man, Thor, Captain America, and Avengers movies.

Marvel Super Hero Squad

Marvel Ultimate Alliance 2

CallOut

Nintendo's Holiday

New releases in the Mario and Zelda franchises are industry events in their own right, but Nintendo is giving gamers a double dose this year. New Super Mario Bros. Wii and The Legend of Zelda: Spirit Tracks are both slated to hit later this holiday season, which is a nice treat for Nintendo fans who usually only get one major entry per year. Take notes, Nintendo: Gamers like this. Don't leave us in the cold next year.

Sony Remastering God of War

We loved the two God of War games when they first came out, and we'll love playing them again on Blu-ray. With remastered visuals running in 720p plus added trophy support, Sony proves that it knows how to give gamers incentives to replay the classics. We hope this trend doesn't stop with the God of War collection; we have a long list of last-gen games we'd gladly buy again to play in true HD.

BioWare's DLC Strategy

Remember back when Mass Effect was going to have a steady flow of DLC? Well, only two came out. The most recent one, entitled Pinnacle Station, was dropped onto Xbox Live with no announcements or fanfare…and it was still disappointing. Things are looking shaky for Dragon Age in this department, too; BioWare is packing in a free DLC code that unlocks a new party member with every copy. That may seem generous, but if the content is done and ready to ship, why not just put it on the disc so people without online access don't get screwed?

HOLLYWOOD & VIDEO GAMES

Can The Marriage From Hell Become A Match Made In Heaven?

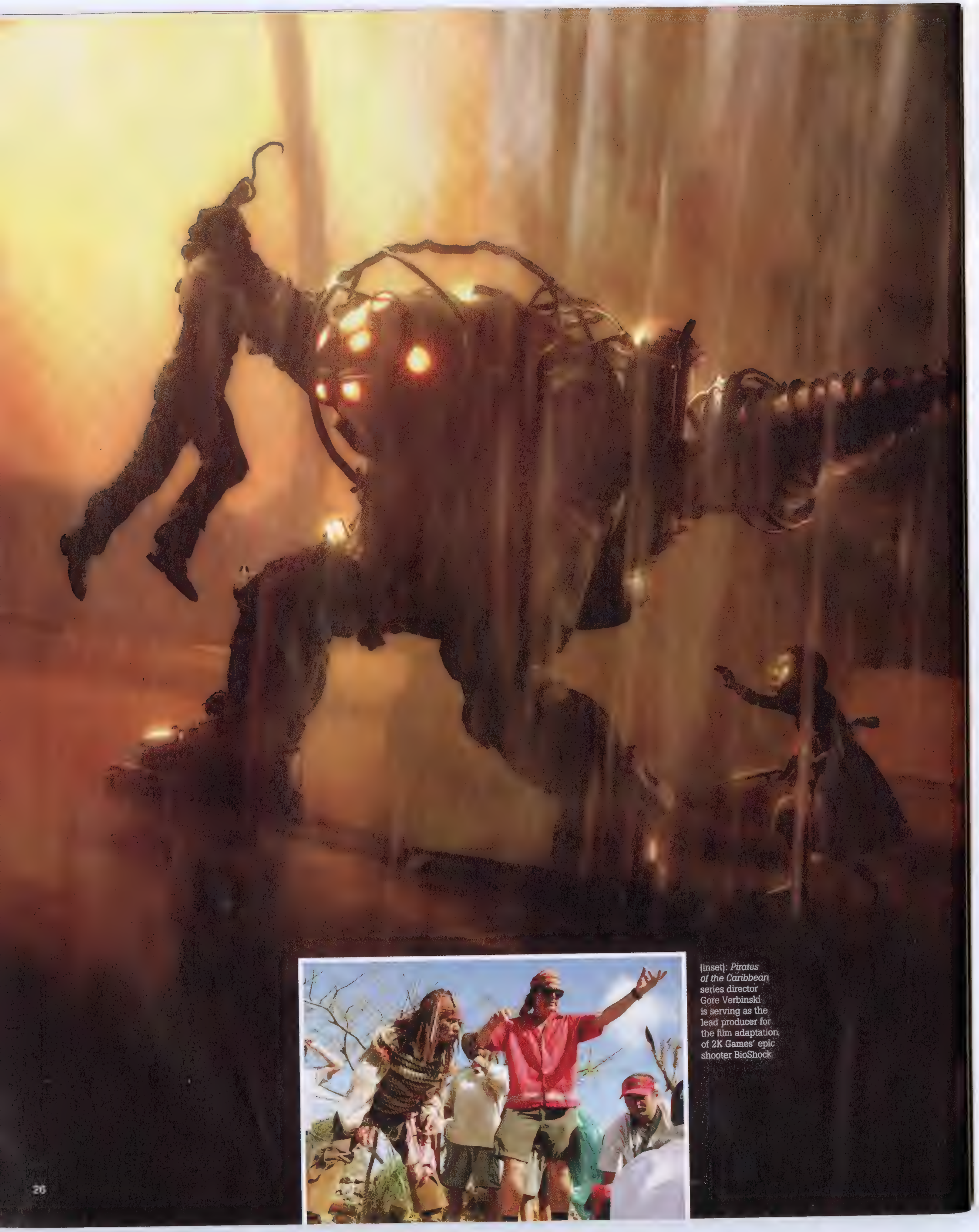
» by Matt Helgeson

To say films based on video games have been disappointing is an understatement. Even as games begin to eclipse film and television as the world's number one form of entertainment, video game derived movies have received largely shoddy treatment at the hands of Hollywood. From the much-reviled Uwe Boll's low-budget desecrations of games like BloodRayne and House of the Dead to more expensive missteps like Max Payne and Hitman, video games often get lost in translation to the silver screen. At best, films like *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* and the Resident Evil series reached the level of competent entertainment, but nothing more.

Thankfully, things may be changing. Over the past year, a steady stream of press releases and news reports have confirmed what we've long hoped: The film industry is finally ready to get serious about video game movies. This time, the video game industry is demanding to be treated as an equal partner in the process.

The news is everywhere. Electronic Arts, represented by the venerable United Talent Agency, signed multiple production deals for its intellectual properties. Blizzard announced that *Spider-Man* director Sam Raimi agreed to direct the film adaptation of its mega-MMO World of Warcraft. Avi Arad (the former chairman of Marvel Studios) is producing films for Sony and Capcom. Nearer on the horizon is legendary producer Jerry Bruckheimer's adaptation of Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time starring Jake Gyllenhaal, which many in the industry hope could be the blockbuster that turns video game films from an afterthought to a summer movie staple. For game fans, there's a lot to look forward to, and the best news is that absolutely none of it involves Uwe Boll.

» *Continued on page 27*



(inset): *Pirates of the Caribbean* series director Gore Verbinski is serving as the lead producer for the film adaptation of 2K Games' epic shooter BioShock

Continued from page 24

A Broken Model

While Uwe Boll is the most notable offender in video game film, he's really just a symptom of a much deeper problem. Historically, the game industry and Hollywood have found it difficult to work together. The reasons are myriad, and have often resulted from the complications inherent in getting two huge entertainment businesses to work in concert.

"The wall needs to be knocked down somehow," observes Jay Cohen, president of development at Jerry Bruckheimer Games. "Each of these businesses runs and operates differently. There are different stakeholders. There is different financing. That's ultimately the reason why things haven't worked out. Because getting everyone to the table – the guy making the game, the guy making the film – and to agree creatively and commercially on what needs to happen is where the [problem] happens."

The differences are striking. Games are generally developed by a single studio of long-term employees, many of whom have worked together for years. Development is funded wholly by the publishers, which mete out milestone payments based on a schedule of production goals. Many times the studio is actually a part of the publisher, meaning that all high-level strategy and scheduling are handled within a single company.

Contrast this with the filmmaking process. Films are funded in a number of ways, usually through partnerships of independent producers, film studios, and outside investors. The creative people involved are also usually independent operators, as teams of directors, cinematographers, technical staff, and actors are brought together for a single project. Freelance writers, sometimes working in teams, work through multiple drafts of a script before a film even hits production.

It's a much more complicated scenario than what is typically seen in games, and has often resulted in a situations where video game companies would sign away film rights to their games with little understanding of the process.

"I was noticing that the different video game companies, including us initially, would go out there without the right representation for expertise in deal making and in connecting you with the right people," says Patrick O'Brien, VP of entertainment at Electronic Arts, who is charged with heading the company's new multimedia strategy. "We don't ever want to be in that situation where you're distancing yourself from the film or you actually had very little to do with it. [That's] one of the reasons we hired United Talent Agency as our agent. We're very serious about this."

Apart from the fundamental differences in the production processes, a subtler dynamic is also at play. Though video games have grown into a huge industry, they still lack the mainstream respect and acceptance of film. This, coupled with the game companies' lack of knowledge about how things are done in Hollywood, often meant publishers and developers were willing to quickly sell off the option rights to a game franchise to the first production company that came calling.

The *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* film is being produced by Hollywood heavyweight Jerry Bruckheimer (center) and Disney

"Someone would get a phone call, and some producer who was interested in Max Payne or whatever, and people would jump," O'Brien recalls. "They'd say, 'Oh this is fantastic, someone is interested in our stuff for a movie!' Now we get those phone calls daily. Gobs of people are interested – but are they the right person for that genre of movie? Or, do we say, 'Thanks for your interest, [but] we're going to be more strategic and think about who's right for this'?"

A New Paradigm

The problems of the past aside, attitudes on both sides seem to be changing for the better. Thirty years in, Hollywood is finally taking games seriously. Even more important, game companies now realize that they need to be active partners in maintaining their franchises across multiple mediums, ensuring the health of their intellectual property in the long term.

Marc Graser, a veteran writer at the Hollywood industry publication *Variety*, sees the change at hand. "At the time [Uwe Boll] was snatching up the rights to all these games, people didn't really take video game movies seriously," Graser comments. "I think that's changed a lot, especially with games turning into big franchises and the studios seeing how much money the publishers are making. They've seen how they've missed the opportunity to make Tomb Raider into a big franchise. They see the potential in a good video game movie now. Studios are desperate for franchises. If there's a hit, whether it's in comic books or video games, it'll only help them sell more tickets at the megaplex."

The success of comic book films like *Spider-Man*, *The Dark Knight*, and *Iron Man* has also had an effect on attitudes towards games. Like games, comics were once seen as a mere niche genre. The art forms share a similar bent towards fantastic characters, imaginative settings, and outlandish action. The recent explosion in comic-derived films has also created a shortage of undeveloped properties in the movie industry that increasingly looks to outside sources for its big action films. With comic films reaching down to B-list characters like Thor and Ant-Man, many in Hollywood are looking to games as the next great gold rush.

"It seems like most of the big comic [franchises] have been picked up," Graser says. "Coming out of the most recent Comic-Con, there are a lot of obscure properties that we've written about being signed lately that don't have a following. The same thing that happened with comic books is happening with games. Studios gravitate toward things that have audiences and are already developed in some way. With a comic book, they can see the illustrations and characters rather than just reading something. They can say, 'I can see what that will look like if it's turned into a movie.' Video games are the same thing. It's already animated – they see the action and the characters. It's not a big bet for them. Plus, the games have already sold millions of copies and made a ton of money."

Interestingly, producer Avi Arad, who established Marvel as a movie powerhouse in his time at the company with the Spider-Man and X-Men films, is betting heavily on video games. His production house currently has four game-based projects in development: Sony's PS3 exclusive hits Uncharted and Infamous, EA's Mass Effect, and Capcom's Lost Planet.

What's On The Way

There are a dizzying number of video game-inspired films in various stages of development, here's a list of some of the most high profile projects and some of the talent attached to each.

Army of Two
Scott Stuber (former Universal executive, producer), Scott Burns (writer, *The Bourne Ultimatum*), EA

BioShock
Juan Carlos Fresnadillo (director, *28 Weeks Later*), Gore Verbinski (as producer, directed Pirates of the Caribbean series)

Dante's Inferno
Eric Newman (producer, *Children of Men*), EA

Dead Space
EA, DJ Caruso (director, *Disturbia*, *Eagle Eye*)

Gears of War
Len Wiseman (director, *Live Free or Die Hard*, *Underworld*), Chris Morgan (writer, *Wanted*, *Fast & Furious*)

God of War
Charles Roven (producer, *The Dark Knight*), David Self (writer, *Road to Perdition*)

Halo
Officially on hold, but rumor says that Steven Spielberg is interested. Previously attached to Lord of the Rings director Peter Jackson

Infamous
Avi Arad (producer), SCEA

Lost Planet
Avi Arad (producer), Capcom

Mass Effect
Avi Arad (producer), EA

Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time
Jerry Bruckheimer Films, Disney

The Sims
John Davis (producer, *Norbit*, *Eragon*), EA

Uncharted
Avi Arad (producer), SCEA

World of Warcraft
Sam Raimi (director, *Spider-Man*)

True Partnership

In this new climate, game companies are looking for more than just interest from Hollywood. Frequently, game creators are demanding a role in the decision making process through the entire production process.

"We are intimately involved creatively," says EA's O'Brien. "We're selecting the writers and directors with the producers. We're vetting and reading every writer presented to us. Each writer comes in with a pitch or a take that we evaluate."

"All you have to do is look at the creative talent they are attaching to these projects," Graser observes. "Sam Raimi is doing a video game movie. Gore Verbinski, who did the Pirates movies, was going to direct BioShock, but he's still on board as a producer and his hands will be all over it. The new director [*28 Weeks Later* director Juan Carlos Fresnadillo – Ed.] they have is great. It's the same with Sony. They see Infamous and Uncharted as big franchises that will come out in the summer. It's not the Uwe Bolls anymore; it's big people putting big money behind them."

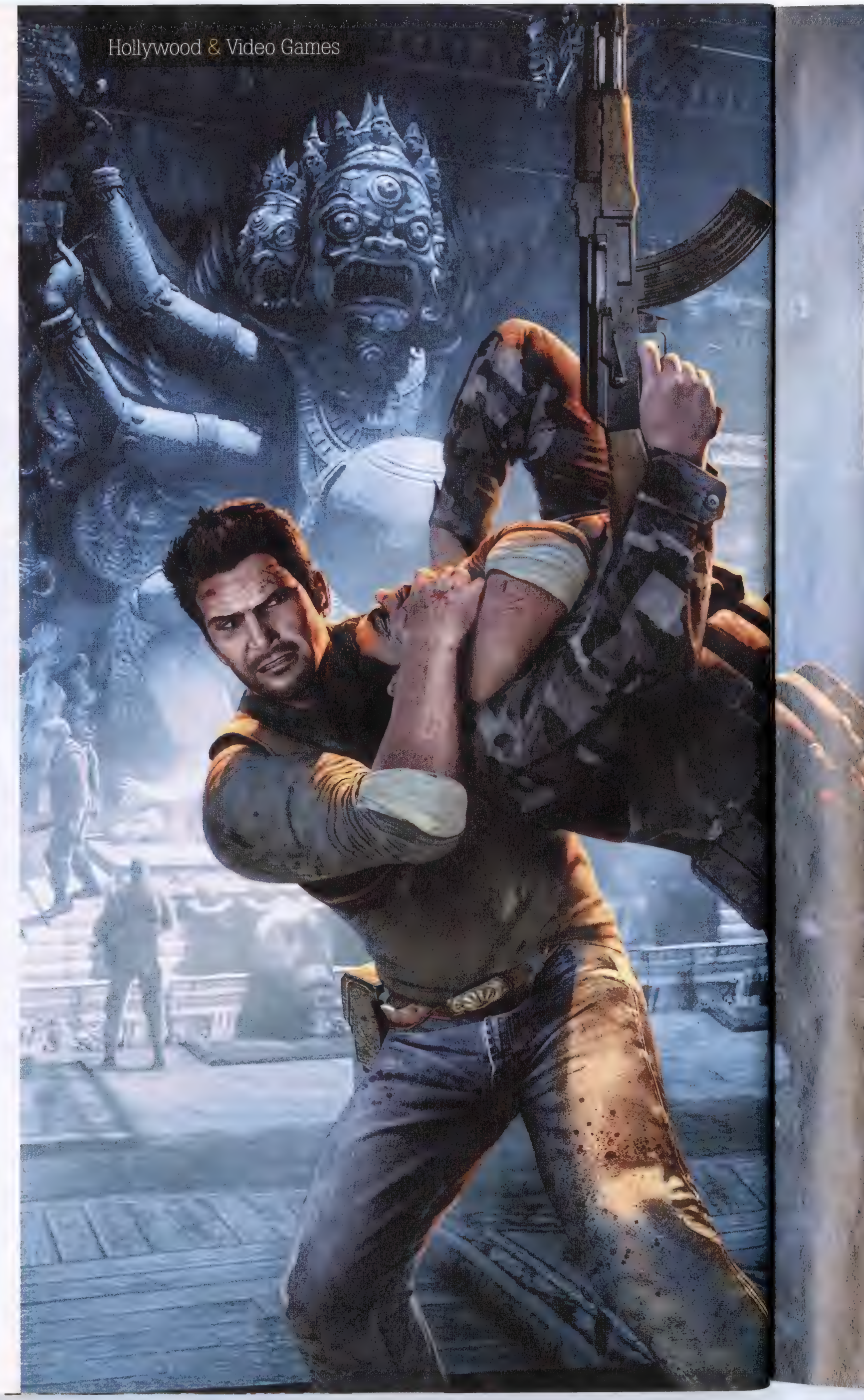
For Prince of Persia creator Jordan Mechner, who maintains control over the franchise film rights despite selling the game IP to Ubisoft, getting the talent right was his number one priority. "There are two points where I really felt that I had a major impact." Mechner says. "The first was by writing the story and the screenplay. The final script has changed a fair amount from my draft, but it still has the contours of the story that I wrote. The second was by choosing Jerry Bruckheimer and Disney as partners. The biggest determinant of a movie's quality is the people who are making it. By going with Bruckheimer and Disney, I knew that if Prince of Persia got made, it would be a really big movie with spectacular production values and an amazing cast."

A Marriage of Convergence

While there are many commercial motivations for forging a new alliance between games and film, the two forms have actually been on a collision course for quite some time. Movies and games are becoming more similar to each other both artistically and from a production standpoint. Games like Call of Duty: Modern Warfare and Uncharted 2: Among Thieves boast production values and set pieces on par with a summer blockbuster. Meanwhile, films like *300* and *Transformers* rely on the kinetic pacing and complex CG modeling of video games, techniques that now often take the place of traditional sets and stunt work.

In July of 2008, French publisher Ubisoft made waves with the announcement that it had acquired the visual effects studio Hybride Technologies, which made its name creating the groundbreaking visuals in films like *300*, *Sin City*, and *Spy Kids*. The studio has been integrated with Ubisoft's internal Digital Arts Studio, and the company hopes to leverage Hybride's expertise in its games while maintaining its work with outside partners in the film industry in a manner similar to the technology and asset sharing that has been going on between LucasArts and Industrial Light & Magic for some time.

» *Continued on page 30*



Producer Avi Arad (inset), famous for shepherding Marvel's Spider-Man and X-Men franchises to the big screen, is working on several video game movies, including Sony's Uncharted and Infamous and EA's Mass Effect.

Ubisoft is producing its own series of shorts based on Assassin's Creed II that will blend CG and live actors

Going It Alone

Given the increasing parallels between film and game production, some studios aren't waiting for Hollywood to come calling. Electronic Arts has already released a Dead Space animated DVD and has one planned for Dante's Inferno, even though both those properties have also been picked up as feature films.

"When something is a great intellectual property, our goal is to bring it to a whole bunch of different media," says EA's Patrick O'Brien. "With Dante's, we have the animated feature, which is a more concrete production timeline. We have that coming out at the same time as the game. There's no reason not to start early if you have a great, compelling character, world, and story."

Ubisoft is taking an even more ambitious approach by creating three short films based on its upcoming Assassin's Creed II that blend live action and CG. The films were funded entirely by Ubisoft, and were created at its Hybride studios with veteran TV and film director Yves Simoneau (*Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*). Similarly, Microsoft has revealed that it plans to release a series of seven anime shorts based on the Halo universe created in conjunction with its new 343 Industries division (which oversees the all Halo-related entertainment products) and five respected Japanese animation studios. All of these projects are being done without one dollar from Hollywood.

"Maybe the Ubis and EAs will start making their own movies," speculates Jerry Bruckheimer Games' Jay Cohen. "[Acvitision CEO Bobby] Kotick was out there talking about games surpassing movies and television. That's why Hollywood is gravitating towards games so much – because they know. The game guys are super talented, they create highly engaging entertainment properties. [Hollywood] is like, 'Wow, what if those guys use their tools to make TV or film content?' I think they are worried."

» Continued from page 28

"In the long term, we want to keep developing great games, but also to expand our brands to other media. I'm responsible for that strategy," says Mathieu Ferland, senior producer of cross media development at Ubisoft. "We still have a long way to go. It started in 2007 when we created our Ubisoft Digital Arts Studio with the intention that, one day, the pre-rendered technology and the real-time technologies could – maybe not merge – but have a great synergy. In 2008, we had the acquisition of Hybride. That was a great addition to our internal expertise. It was a nice way to get in touch with the movie industry. Our goal in the long run is more to become an IP creator and content provider on multiple media, movies being one of them."

To The Future

Clearly, a lot of money is being bet on the fact that movies and games can work together in a more effective manner. If these new, more meaningful partnerships work, the benefits for both industries could be huge. "I think the movie guys are going to help the game guys and the game guys are going to help the movie guys," says Jay Cohen. "The film will help us with story, character, angling shots properly, building drama and suspense. I think the game guys will have a lot to offer because the consumer connection we have with our customers far surpasses the films, outside of a few outliers like Star Wars. In technology, we have a lot to offer. We're just at the tip of the iceberg."

If the stage is set, perhaps the only thing left is for a blockbuster video game movie that can connect with a public that is rightfully skeptical of the genre. On May 28 of next year, all eyes will be on *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*. On paper, it's got all the ingredients of a blockbuster. Its based on a long-running and successful game property, and funded by two of the most powerful companies in the film industry, Jerry Bruckheimer Films and Disney. Its director, Mike Newell, has a proven track record with films that include big budget productions (*Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*) and smaller, character-based stories (*Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *Donnie Brasco*). Most importantly, it stars Jake Gyllenhaal, who, while not known as an action star, has the acting chops to create a character that really resonates. Here again, video games seem to be learning from the successes of comic book films.

"Some of the best superhero or comic-book movies lately have been with really good, quirky indie actors who are putting on the tights for the first time, so to speak," says Jordan Mechner. "Robert Downey as Iron Man, Christian Bale as Batman, Tobey Maguire as Spider-Man. I was really glad when they cast Jake because he has the vulnerability, intelligence, and humor that are such an important part of who the Prince of Persia is, as I imagine him. He's a good fighter, but he doesn't exist to fight; he's not Conan the Barbarian."

Strangely, the multi-million dollar stakes involved have, for once, made video games' sometimes adversarial publishers allies of a sort. As hard as they compete for the hearts and wallets of gamers, in this case one movie's success could serve to raise the fortunes of the entire slate of upcoming adaptations, just as Spider-Man's enormous box office returns helped pave the way for the rest of the superhero revival.

"Whether it's EA or one of our competitors, we would be delighted to have a big blockbuster movie that could help prove out the genre," O'Brien says. "Whether it's Prince of Persia or World of Warcraft or BioShock or one of our films, we're excited to see what the future brings." ◆

Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time, starring Jake Gyllenhaal and Gemma Arterton, looks to have blockbuster potential

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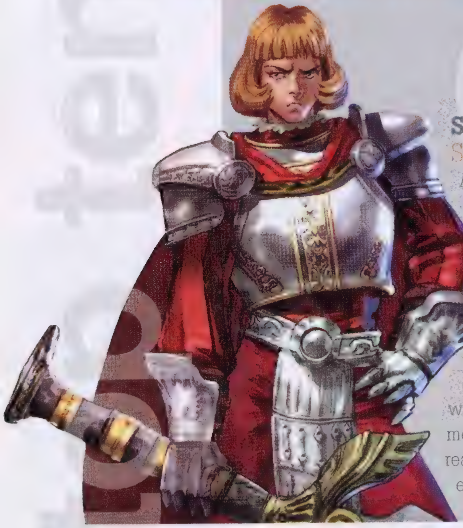
THE TOP TEN WORST HAIRSTYLES



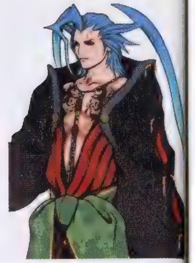
01

Strife Astlar Grandall –
Soulcalibur III

A unanimous shoo-in for the most dubious position on our list, Strife isn't a happy looking lad. For good reason – appointed ruler of his father's empire at age 10, Strife apparently never thought to update his pageboy hairstyle. Perhaps he was too busy slaughtering family members and losing his grip on reality. The hair alone is reason enough for the permanent scowl.

02

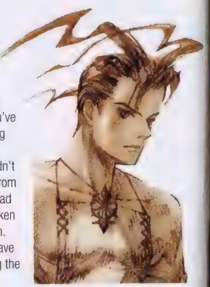
Seymour Guado –
Final Fantasy X



As a leader of the Guado nation and a maester of Yevon, it could be said that an ornamental appearance is warranted. Still, we can't justify what lies perched atop Guado's inflated head. More structured than organic, his long blue tresses defy gravity and basic fashion sense simultaneously. His look hardly inspires reverence.

03

Ashley Riot –
Vagrant Story



Even if you've never picked up Vagrant Story, chances are you've seen Akihiko Yoshida's stunning character illustrations. But Yoshida's masterful skills couldn't save Riskbreaker Ashley Riot from the hair hall of shame. If the lead protagonist's 'do can be mistaken for antlers, you have a problem. His out-of-control hair could have used another once-over during the development process.

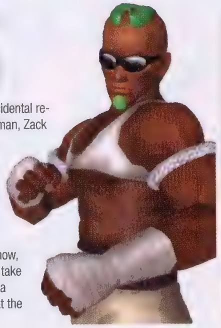
04

Blue Suede Goo –
Clayfighter

An Elvis impersonator extraordinaire, everything about Blue Suede Goo is exaggerated. But Goo's interpretation of the King's original coif is what caught our attention. Not just a tacky prop, Goo uses his hair offensively in battle. There are much more stylish ways to use the hair-as-a-weapon schtick, as evidenced by Mortal Kombat's Sindel and Sega's Bayonetta. At least Goo didn't craft his jumpsuit out of hair.

05

Zack –
Dead or Alive



Bearing more than a coincidental resemblance to Dennis Rodman, Zack is always riffling through new cuts and color. The only constant is that each look is worse than the last. We vote that Zack use the money he routinely stumbles upon to hire a good stylist. For now, this particular look should take after Zack Island and find a permanent resting place at the bottom of the ocean.

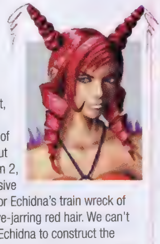
06

Adoring Fan –
Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion

One of the most annoying NPCs in Oblivion, we've all had the urge to off this guy. In fact, as evidenced by YouTube, many of you did – and were creative in doing so. Offering to carry your weapons, shine your shoes, or (shudder) give you a backrub, cutting his hair would be the biggest favor the Adoring Fan could perform. Paired with his pixie-like face, the look is too much to stomach.

07

Echidna –
The Bouncer



Surprisingly the only female to make our list, Echidna's look alone makes up for the lack of ladies. One of the debut titles on the PlayStation 2, The Bouncer's impressive graphics did nothing for Echidna's train wreck of an ensemble or her eye-jarring red hair. We can't fathom what inspired Echidna to construct the cyclone-like curls, but for better or worse it caught our attention.

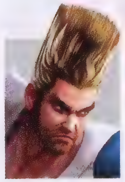
08

Rufus –
Street Fighter IV

At 6'5" and 410 pounds, Rufus is one of the more memorable characters on our bad hair roster. If you look past his barely constraining body suit, you will notice his hair is equally offensive. Despite the Gloworm atop his head, Rufus thinks himself particularly attractive. We are not going to be the ones to contradict him.

09

Paul Phoenix –
Tekken



Popular in the '50s and '60s, the flattop was commonly found within the military, law enforcement, and government positions. Paul Phoenix is none of the above. Nor is his look on par with that of the Fresh Prince or Drew Carey. Phoenix's oversized interpretation of the close-cropped cut landed him a place on our list, surpassing similar contenders such as Street Fighter's William F. Guile.

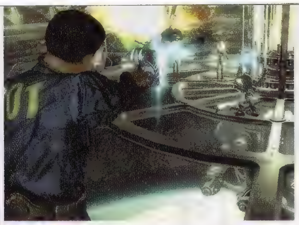
10

Nathan "Rad" Spencer –
Bionic Commando

Nathan Spencer has gone through his fair share of makeovers in the past, sporting hair in a variety of lengths and colors before being reimagined with dreads. We think he pulls off the look just about as well as American Idol contestant Jason Castro. Too bad Spencer's wife isn't around to offer some self-grooming tips… or is she?

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

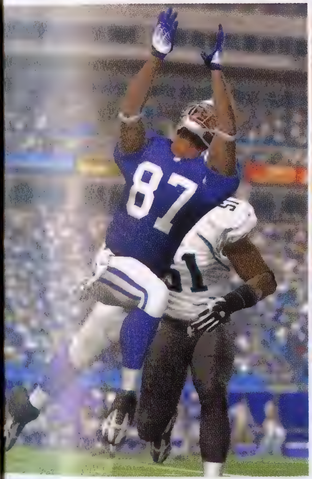
NEWS WITH A SARCASTIC SPIN



Splinter Cell: Conviction
thegood

(ABOVE) Bethesda is finally getting PS3 fans of Fallout 3 up to speed with DLC for the game. The expansion packs Broken Steel, Operation: Anchorage, and The Pitt should already be out for download, with Point Lookout and Mothership Zeta following on October 8. The company is also releasing a Fallout 3 Game of the Year edition on October 13 for PS3, 360, and PC that includes all of the DLC.

(LEFT) Sometimes good things do come to those who wait. The release dates for BioShock 2 (PS3, 360, PC) and Splinter Cell: Conviction (360) were up in the air, but now that they are official – and they're thankfully close. BioShock 2 hits February 9 and Conviction will be out February 23. We hear Sam Fisher had to do sick, terrible things to make this happen, but we won't lose any sleep over it, that's for sure. We can't wait to get more blood on our hands.



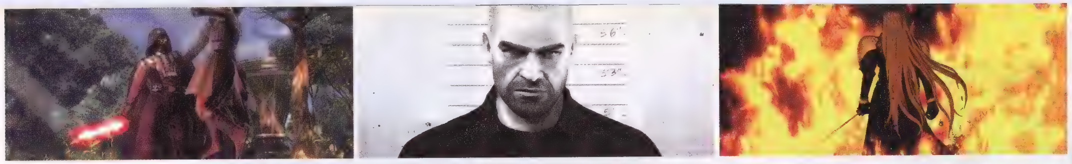
(LEFT) The Madden series is as good as it's been in a while, but Madden NFL 10 sales are down by about 18 percent from this same time last year. Of course, "bad" for Madden this year means only 1.9 million copies were sold as compared to 09's 2.3 million. That's like saying Peyton Manning only threw for a 29-yard TD as opposed to a 67-yard one.

(ABOVE) Australia's government-sponsored ratings board – the one that loves video games so much – has banned Left 4 Dead 2 for everything from excessive gore with melee weapons to the "realistic, frenetic, and unrelenting violence" of the game's infected. Wait until they see a dingo eat their baby.

(LEFT) While we thought it was distasteful for Guitar Hero 5 to feature a cartoon Kurt Cobain jumping around singing other people's songs in the game, that's just the beginning of the ugliness. Widow Courtney Love blew up on Twitter about the game, and Cobain's former band mates Dave Grohl and Krist Novoselic also disapproved. However, Activision came back saying it was Love herself who had sole power over Cobain's likeness and its usage, and that she signed off on it fully aware of what developer Neversoft was going to do with Kurt's avatar. We expect Love to lie and act crazy – that's what she does – but that only begs the question of why Neversoft used Kurt that way in the first place.

> “We have a real culture of thrift. The goal that I had in bringing a lot of the packaged goods folks into Activision about 10 years ago was to take all the fun out of making video games.”

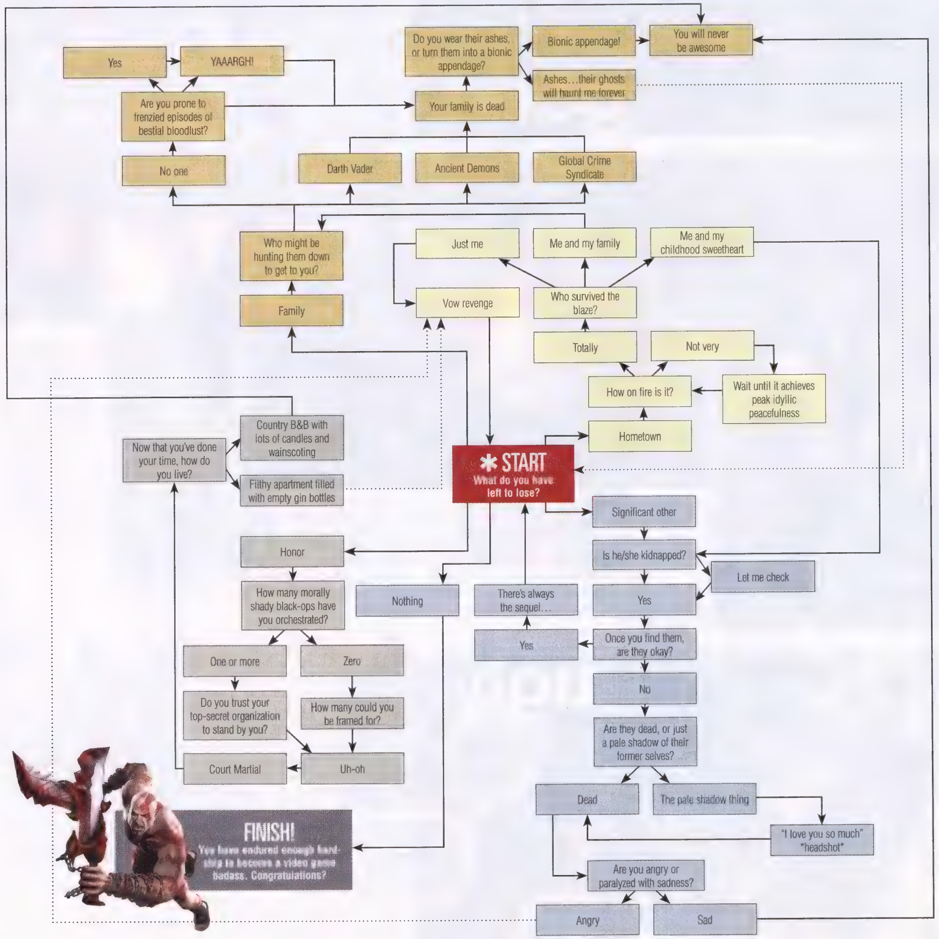
– It's mission accomplished for Activision Blizzard CEO Bobby Kotick, who also says he wants to ingrain "skepticism, pessimism, and fear" in the company's culture in response to the tough economic times.

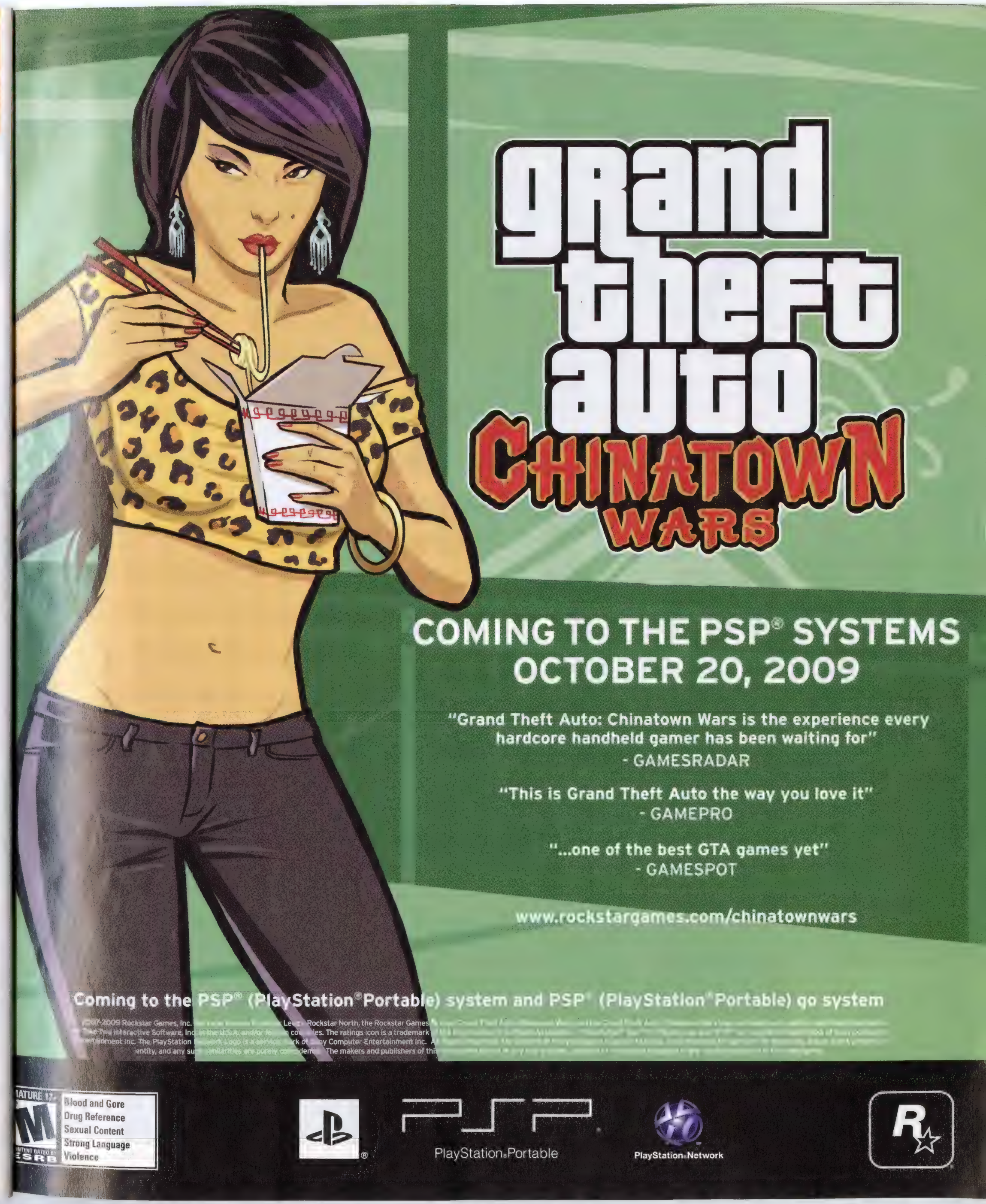


HARD KNOCKS

Have You Endured Enough To Be A Video Game Badass?

Video game heroes don't have it easy – horror, loss, and adversity plague their lives and shape them into the indomitable machines that gamers love to control. Traverse this flowchart to follow in the harrowing footsteps of a typical video game badass; once you've lost it all, you might have what it takes to stand alongside the likes of stone-cold legends like Kratos, Cloud, and Sam Fisher.


Yes
YAAARGH!
Are you prone to frenzied episodes of bestial bloodlust?
No one
Do you wear their ashes, or turn them into a bionic appendage?
Bionic appendage!
You will never be awesome
Ashes…their ghosts will haunt me forever
Your family is dead
Darth Vader
Ancient Demons
Global Crime Syndicate
Who might be hunting them down to get to you?
Family
Just me
Me and my family
Me and my childhood sweetheart
Vow revenge
Who survived the blaze?
Totally
Not very
How on fire is it?
Wait until it achieves peak idyllic peacefulness
Hometown
* START
What do you have left to lose?
Now that you've done your time, how do you live?
Country B&B with lots of candles and wainscoting
Filthy apartment filled with empty gin bottles
Significant other
Is he/she kidnapped?
Let me check
Yes
Once you find them, are they okay?
Yes
There's always the sequel…
No
Are they dead, or just a pale shadow of their former selves?
Dead
The pale shadow thing
"I love you so much" *headshot*
Are you angry or paralyzed with sadness?
Angry
Sad
Honor
How many morally shady black-ops have you orchestrated?
One or more
Zero
Do you trust your top-secret organization to stand by you?
How many could you be framed for?
Court Martial
Uh-oh
Nothing
FINISH!
You have endured enough hardship to become a video game badass. Congratulations?



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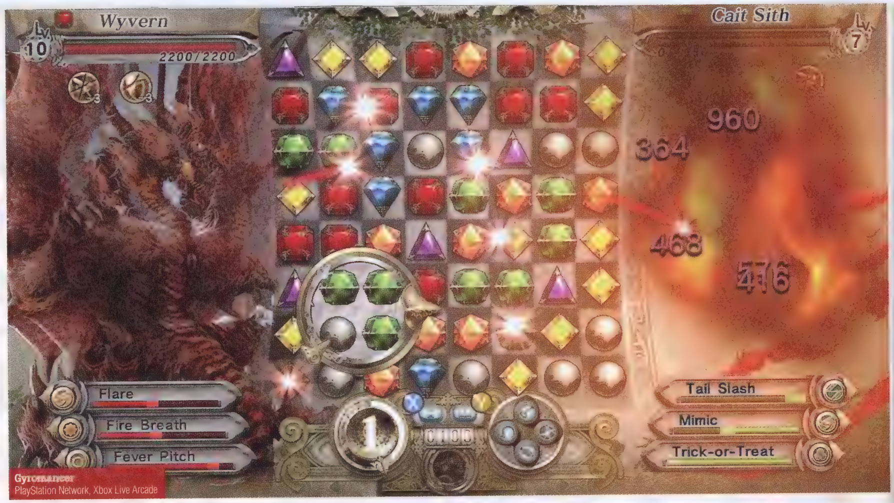

Gyromancer
PlayStation Network, Xbox Live Arcade

Square Enix and PopCap join forces, Nicalis explores the Night Sky, and P.B. Winterbottom finds a home

by Matt Miller

Welcome to the new and improved Impulse. The advent of our new website allows for a wealth of content for someone interested in navigating the increasingly crowded waters of downloadable games. Impulse exists to catch the games that might otherwise fall through the cracks – the very best titles coming for Xbox Live Arcade, WiiWare, PlayStation Network, and all the other burgeoning platforms for small and innovative games. I'll still showcase my favorites on this page every month, but every week will now bring news of other titles with expanded write-ups on gameinformer.com. Do you like the new format? Are there some great games out there I've missed? Drop me a line and let me know your thoughts.

First up this month is a surprising cooperative project between PopCap Games and Square Enix. The recognized leader in polished puzzle games, PopCap has met with huge success through titles like Zuma, Plants vs. Zombies, and Bejeweled. The latter franchise's most recent iteration is Bejeweled Twist, which altered the match-three-gems mechanic by demanding that players rotate a group of gems to shape the board. Add summoned monsters, epic music, and the gorgeous art of a Final Fantasy game to that formula, and you have **Gyromancer**. Riffing off the RPG/Puzzle vibe first explored in Puzzle Quest, Gyromancer delivers a sprawling storyline about a powerful immortal wizard who summons powerful beasts with which to do battle. Twisting groups of gems on the game board builds up special attack powers; even while you try hard to deny those powers to your monstrous opponent. Leveling, world exploration, treasure – all the classic RPG components are in place, but with the polish of a PopCap puzzle game as the centerpiece of gameplay. Suffice to say, I had a hard time turning it off.

I'm increasingly impressed with the work of development house Nicalis; last month I detailed their polished remake of Cave Story. Its next WiiWare title is an original creation. **Night Sky** has players navigating a shadowy landscape of perpetual dusk. You control a small sphere that progresses ever rightward in the classic platforming style. Button presses change the state of the ball – making it faster with one press or increasing its friction with another. Each screen is an action-oriented puzzle – sometimes changing the rules by reversing gravity, or allowing you to control pinball flippers instead of direct control of the ball. Mellow music and the cool shadow art could make this one of the more intriguing titles headed to Nintendo's download service.

Way back at E3 2008, I came across a clever little game called **The Misadventures of P.B. Winterbottom**, which detailed the antics of a misanthropic mustachioed villain and his quest for pie. At the time, no publisher had snatched up the title, but it was too clever an idea to be ignored for long. The folks at 2K stepped up, and the game is now slated for release on Live Arcade. Fans of Jonathan Blow's Braid will find a lot to appreciate in the humorous puzzler. P.B. warps time around him to reach the object of his lust, and once he reaches the tasty prize, it's on to another seemingly impossible-to-reach fruity dessert. The old black and white movie aesthetic gives the title a feel all its own. I can't wait to get my hands on the latest build of the game and see how it has progressed from its early incarnations last year.

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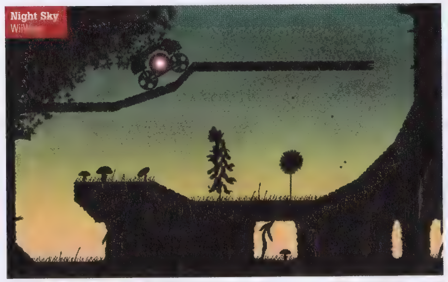
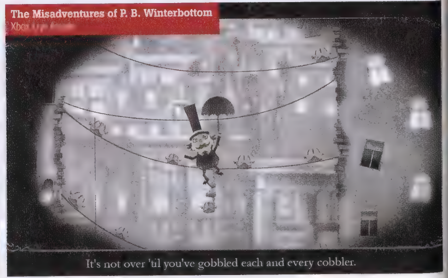


Night Sky
WiiWare



The Misadventures of P. B. Winterbottom
Xbox Live Arcade

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October Top 20

Rank	Game Title (System)	Rank Last Month	Months in Top 20
1	**Madden NFL 10** (360)	–	–
2	**Wii Sports Resort** (Wii)	1	2
3	**Madden NFL 10** (PS3)	–	–
4	**Batman: Arkham Asylum** (360) Batman finally makes good as more than two million copies of Arkham Asylum sold on consoles within the first three weeks of the game's release.	–	–
5	**Batman: Arkham Asylum** (PS3)	–	–
6	**Madden NFL 10** (PS2)	–	–
7	**Dissidia: Final Fantasy** (PSP)	–	–
8	**Wii Fit** (Wii)	4	16
9	**Mario Kart Wii** (Wii)	5	17
10	**Fossil Fighters** (DS)	–	–
11	**Mario Kart DS** (DS)	6	46
12	**New Super Mario Bros.** (DS)	9	40
13	**Wii Play** (Wii)	11	31
14	**Pokémon Platinum** (DS)	7	6
15	**NCAA Football 10** (360)	2	2
16	**Professor Layton and the Diabolical Box** (DS) Despite being released late in the month, Professor Layton's newest outing sold more than 67,500 units in the U.S. during the month of August – a healthy number for a game of this type.	–	–
17	**Madden NFL** (Wii)	–	–
18	**Wolfenstein** (360)	–	–
19	**EA Sports Active Bundle** (Wii)	10	4
20	**Tiger Woods PGA Tour 10** (Wii)	12	3

Listings based upon NPD data of units sold for August 2009

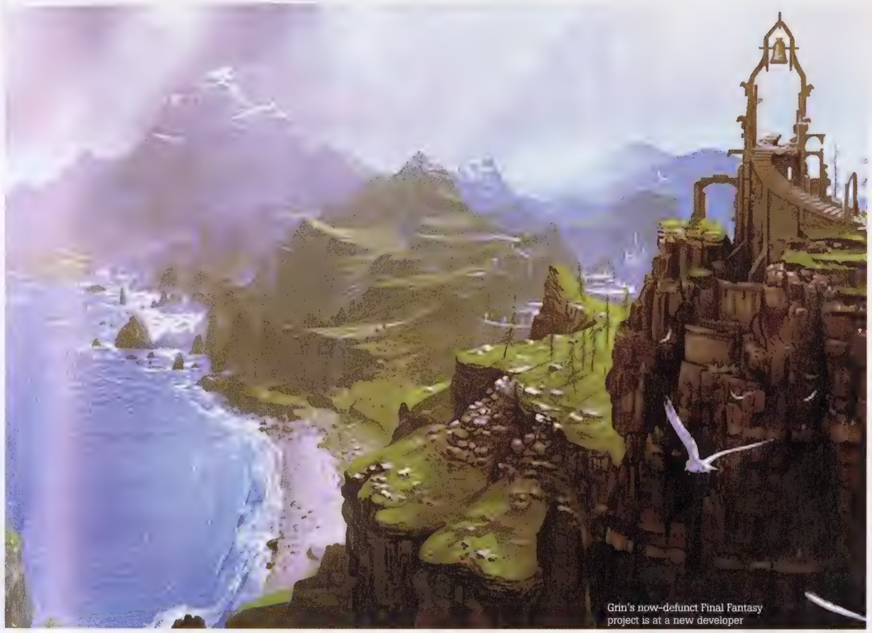
news

Wii Price Cut Crashes the Party

New Wii MotionPlus Deal, Too

Nintendo doesn't traditionally present or show any of its own games at Tokyo Game Show (the company used to host its own Space World event instead), but this year it crashed the party anyway. During the show Nintendo announced a price cut for the Wii, talking it down from $249 to $199, maintaining Nintendo's historic penchant for offering one of the cheaper, if not the cheapest, home consoles on the market. The Wii's new price puts it on the same price point as the hard drive-less Xbox 360 Arcade, and well below the new $299 price points for higher-end versions of Microsoft and Sony's systems.

The company also announced a limited edition Wii MotionPlus bundle deal featuring two Wii MotionPlus peripherals along with Wii Sports Resort for $59.99 – an overall savings of $10. » *by Matthew Kato*



Grin's now-defunct Final Fantasy project is at a new developer

Dreamcasts, Delays & No-Pays

Final Fantasy and Downloads for Future?

There is always a lot going on behind the scenes in the video game industry, and we try and share the rumors and scuttlebutt we hear about your favorite games, developers, and publishers. Loose Talk lets you in on what goes on behind closed doors and what things might be in store for the future.

Alpha Protocol Still In Beta?

There have been a slew of games that have changed their release dates from 2009 to 2010 recently, and it looks like Sega's Alpha Protocol (developed by Obsidian Entertainment) is the latest in a long list of titles that are being delayed. The title was originally supposed to come out this month, but that's not going to happen. Signs point to a summer 2010 release, but Loose Talk has heard that the game has yet to receive a new release date.

Sony Meets Sega

Most meetings are soul-sapping affairs with blather about the revised DEC projections and reminders about the responsibility that comes with the privilege of having a casual Friday dress policy. Not so with Sega and Sony. Recently the French site objectif-sega put up the purported minutes of a meeting between Sega and Sony, and they contained a few interesting tidbits.

- Sony wants Sega to provide them with a list of Dreamcast titles they can offer on PSN for digital download, including any exclusives.
- Sony is working on a PS2 emulator for the PS3 and wants to put all PS2 titles on PSN.
- Sega is considering putting out a Sonic Blu-ray collecter's retrospective for around $99. Sony says it would love to have PSN-exclusive power ups or game modes.
- Sony is contemplating putting some Japanese Sega titles like those in the Yakuza series in a special Import section of PSN with a range of prices from $9.99 to $39.99.

The Real Demise of Grin?

Now-defunct developer Grin garnered a bad reputation with the public after it put out clunkers like Bionic Commando and Wanted: Weapons of Fate. While it seemed like the bad sales of Bionic Commando led to the company's downfall, Grin was well-respected enough for Square Enix to hand it a Final Fantasy project codenamed Fortress. However, that's where things went sour. We've heard that for whatever reason Square Enix didn't make expected payments to Grin for the project and that – not Bionic Commando's suckitude – is why the developer is no longer with us. GameIndustry.biz is reporting that Square Enix has handed the project to another developer.

Contact us with insider info at loosetalk@gameinformer.com and we'll be all ears

TidBits

Fun Facts About **Shadow Complex**

- There used to be an achievement for killing 10,000 enemies, and it was suggested by someone at Epic it should be named "Kill Town – Population: You."
- Each foam glob fired from the Foam Gun is randomly created with 7-10 separate animating and growing meshes.
- The deer head in the lake house was going to be tied to a secret deer enemy you could shoot in the forest that was never put in the game.
- There used to be a bug where if you were hyperspeed running outside you could jump up forever until you were outside the world.
- The small robot in the game was originally named "O-Bomb-A," but due to its resemblance to a certain political figure's name, the name was changed to "Bomba."
- The entire game was designed on paper and then created in Adobe Illustrator prior to any levels being created in the Unreal Engine. It even had little stick figures and measurements of jump heights and run distances so team members could play through the game.
- Prior to recording the actual voiceover, developer Chair "roughed-in" the cutscenes and Shadow Complex director, Donald Mustard, recorded his own voice for each character. His falsetto rendition of Claire always got a good laugh during early demonstrations.
- The final song in Shadow Complex, "Light of the Day/Dark of the Night" was performed by former American Idol contestant Shaun Barrowes, who is the brother of Chair team member Orlando.
- The entire Epic test team used to sing the ending song "Light of the Day/Dark of the Night" every time someone in the room beat the game. They sang this song 8-10 times a day on average for 2 months.

the LORE MASTERS

How a legion of dedicated game developers keep their fictions straight

By Ben Reeves

Highever
Waking Sea
West to Orlais
Coast
North
Amaranthine
Lake Calenhad Docks
Imperial Hwy
Ferelden
Denerim
Dragon's Peak
Drakon River
South Reach
Brecilian Forest
Ruins
Heart of the Forest
The West Road
Lothering
The Imperial Road
Redcliffe Village
Frostback Mountains
Hills
Ostagar
Gwaren
Amaranthine Ocean
Korcari Wilds

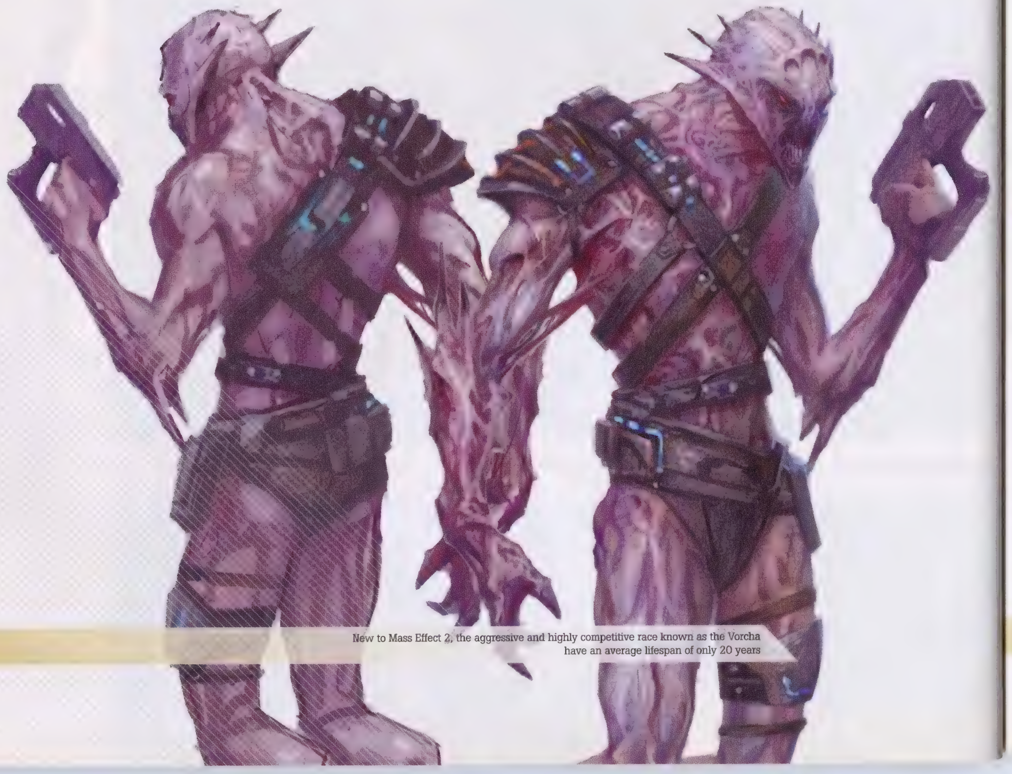
Casey Hudson was staring at a massive problem. As executive producer for the Mass Effect franchise, Hudson must keep an eye out for wrinkles in the franchise's fiction. Months into the development of Mass Effect 2, he stumbled across a problem so big it affected the history of an entire civilization and threatened the storytelling integrity of the entire franchise. Hudson knew he had to stomp the problem out right away.

Early in production for the sequel, BioWare artists sketched a new race of aliens called the Vorcha. "We wanted to create a race of creatures that was this kind of terrifying pure evil animal," Hudson explains. The art team wasted no time dreaming up some of the nastiest rat-like aliens the Milky Way had ever seen.

As Mass Effect 2 moved forward, Hudson noticed a discrepancy within the company's fiction. "We'd worked up a backstory about how the Vorcha had developed faster than light travel and all these technical tools used for labor and things like that," Hudson says. "But if you went back to look at what they were supposed to be, they were just horrible despicable looking creatures; they didn't look like they could do much other than kill and eat."

Hudson realized the culture they had formed around their new menace didn't fit within the team's original premise. The Vorcha function on animal instincts; there was no way they built a highly evolved, technological society on their own. Hudson made the tough call in favor of story consistency, scrapping much of the work BioWare poured into shaping the Vorcha's culture and rewriting a new history that presented the new aliens as scavengers and thieves who acquired technology and ships from other races.

It's never easy to scrap weeks' worth of development, but Hudson and BioWare aren't alone. Game developers across the country deal with the erratic rhythms of game design; game mechanics, characters, or even levels can fall out at a moment's notice. A game's narrative – and the universe around it – needs to be flexible enough to absorb these kinds of seismic shifts. Video game stories need a strong hand to guide them through the hazards of a game's organic development. They need someone capable of battling back the voices of a hundred different contributors and ensuring that a property stays on course. They need a loremaster.



New to Mass Effect 2, the aggressive and highly competitive race known as the Vorcha have an average lifespan of only 20 years

FICTIONAL ACCURACY

All the organization in the world can't hold back Murphy's Law, but sometimes companies find a playful way to deal with narrative discrepancies. "One of the main things we've always done with Elder Scrolls is to maintain deniability," explains Kurt Kuhlmann, senior game designer at Bethesda Softworks. "As long as the lore is presented from the point of view of someone within the fictional world, it's okay for someone else from within the world to have a different point of view. As soon as we step outside the game and say 'This is actually true,' it's much harder to reconcile any contradictions."

A classic example of this in the Elder Scrolls lore is referred to as the "Dragon Break." During development of Morrowind, the writers at Bethesda noticed a gap in their timeline. Nothing happened historically over a period of over 1,000 years. Details of the world's history jumped from the year 1190 to the year 2260, when the later date likely should have been 1260. The gap was likely the result of a typo that happened when someone input dates on Bethesda's internal timeline. But before the typo was discovered, the game's fiction had already expanded past the point of making a simple fix. Events and details taking place after 2260 had already been established, so altering the world's chronology would have been a massive headache. The solution? Maintain deniability.

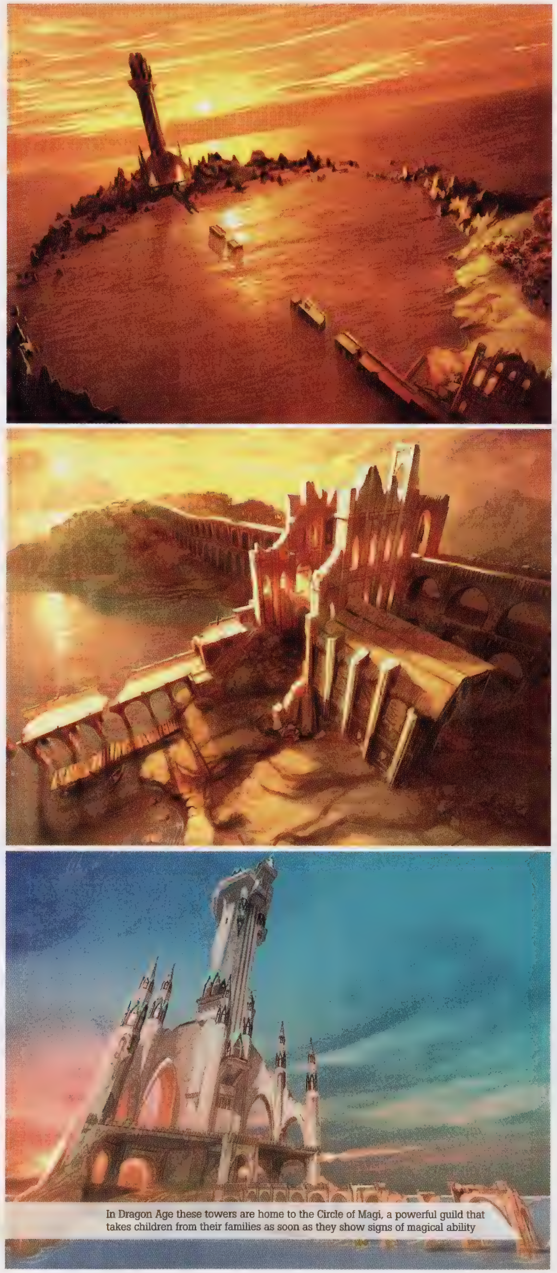
"One of the designers decided to jump on that and started writing about the Dragon Break — an event where a group of religious fanatics actually 'broke time' through some esoteric ritual," Kuhlmann explains. "I responded with another in-game book, *The Dragon Break Reconsidered*, which explained away the lost 1,200 years as a simple error in interpreting ancient records." Which of these explanations is true Elder Scrolls lore? Bethesda has never officially specified, and likely never will.

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Even the most proficient loremaster can't hold a whole world in his or her head at one time. Loremasters must harness the many organizational tools at their disposal. Timelines, maps, writing style guides, art reference guides, internal wikis, encyclopedias, family trees, and alien language translations are just a few of the tools loremasters use each day. "The amount of information on our wiki is more than we could ever impart to the player," says David Gaider, lead writer for Dragon Age: Origins and author of *Dragon Age: The Stolen Throne*. "But we need it all there for our internal research."

During development of Dragon Age, BioWare felt it was important to make all their characters talk in a way that was consistent with a fantasy setting. "But what do we mean by that?" Gaider asks. "We need our writing style guide to communicate what that means to the rest of the writers."

This process isn't as simple as it sounds. A word like "architect" might sound classical to one writer, but another may believe that the word is too modern for a fantasy setting. "It's amazing how many arguments we've had over a single word," Gaider admits. In cases like these, BioWare's loremasters research the etymology of the word in question to dig up its real historical origin before they decide whether or not to put it



In Dragon Age these towers are home to the Circle of Magi, a powerful guild that takes children from their families as soon as they show signs of magical ability

BIBLE STUDY

The Evolution of Halo Lore

The Halo Bible is considered the most extensive collection of Halo lore on the planet. "You'd be surprised how much detailed information exists about the Forerunners, for example," teases Frank O'Connor, development director for the Halo franchise and current holder of the Halo Bible. "Almost everything we do is canonical, so we simply roll data, characters, and events into our bible as they're built." While Microsoft's comprehensive handbook may look like a well-organized collection of documents today, the keystone to the Xbox's most popular shooter has an eventful past.

Originally created by Bungie as a reference guide for the franchise, the bible was such a secretive document that few were even allowed to flip through its weathered pages. It's rumored that the copy given to Eric Nylund – author of a trilogy of Halo novels – was quickly retrieved after the writer had finished his work on the property. "When I worked at Bungie, I was exposed to the document," O'Connor recalls. "It was a bulky, dry thing that was fairly terrifying." The bible went through a couple years of haphazard handling, resulting in a reference book that was useful only to Halo veterans. However, after Halo became one of the biggest properties on the planet, Microsoft knew it needed to make sure its most important reference material was representative of the brand's status.

To whip the bible into shape, Microsoft enlisted the help of a transmedia document service called Starlight Runner Entertainment. Starlight – which has worked on properties as diverse as Tron, Coca Cola, and Transformers – spent nearly a year working with Microsoft and Bungie to organize the Halo Bible. The process was a costly affair, but the end result was a presentable document. This was a necessary step because many of Microsoft's partners, such as Del Rey Books, Marvel Comics, and 20th Century Fox, have needed to reference the ever-evolving events of the Halo universe.

Madden NFL 10

To most critics Madden NFL 10 is the best football experience of this generation. Improvements to the blocking system, wide receiver-cornerback jostling, revamped scouting, and the addition of the highly coveted online franchise proved EA Sports wasn't simply milking an exclusive license, it was doing the hard work necessary to win over jaded football fans. Despite Madden NFL 10's wide acceptance as a step in the right direction, there are always decisions open for debate. Using reader-generated questions, we grilled EA Tiburon creative director Ian Cummings on the finer points of virtual football.

Thanks for turning the game speed for online games to slow. What other gameplay changes are you planning on releasing in patches?
IAN CUMMINGS: We will continue to tune the game and fix exploits that come up based on what we gather from community feedback. There will be many things addressed – from things like blocking AI to lessening the amount of holding on field goals…we have a lot planned for the next few months to extend the life of Madden NFL 10 via title updates. It really is the beauty of the new consoles that we can further tune the experience based directly on feedback to keep our fans happy for an even longer period of time than previously possible.

I really like the receiver jams at the line of scrimmage, but it seems like once a receiver gets bumped off his route he forgets about his responsibility or quits running his route. Why is that?
IC: I honestly don't recall them stopping or not running their route…I'd need to see an example of this in action. Typically it just disrupts their timing, and that is by design.

Why do you make someone join an online match to get the new online roster? Couldn't you handle that a different way, like automatically downloading it when you sign on?
IC: You actually don't have to do this. This year you can just jump into the depth chart screen to download the latest update.

What were the little touches that you wanted to get into the game this year but didn't have time for?
IC: There are a few things that just didn't make the cut (as always is the case in game development), but to me there are a few polish items that I am upset we weren't able to get fixed, mainly around audio.

Why can't I handle substitution packages in between games in franchise or online franchise mode? It's a pain moving a WR into the slot for each 3WR set while keeping him in the 2WR sets when the playcall clock is ticking.
IC: This has been requested before, but as always, it comes down to priorities due to the short development cycle. We'll continue to explore adding this in the future.

Why did you use the superstar camera in co-op instead of a normal gameplay camera?
IC: Co-op was definitely a design experiment for us – we wanted to make it feel like we were giving everyone a totally different way to play – not just a tacked-on mode. We've learned a lot about this (notably the reaction to the cameras) for the future.

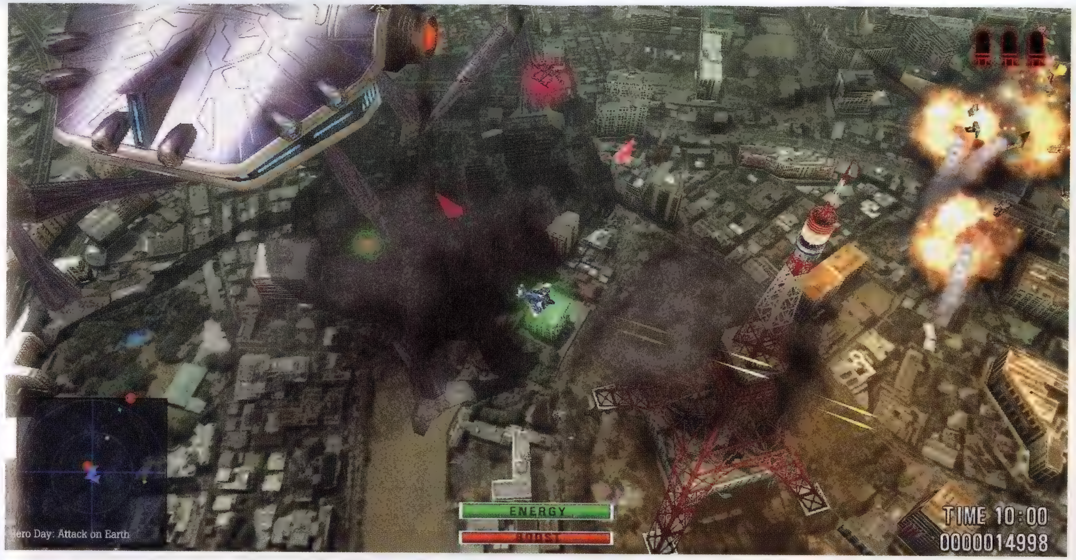
The AI playcalling in Superstar mode hasn't changed since it's been added. Why not?
IC: It actually has changed. Teams call plays based on their strengths and weaknesses like never before in Madden. It always has been a wish list item for the team to utilize their "superstar" more in play selection, but it has always been a tough decision to make the play calling unrealistically weighted at the risk of them going away from their real-life tendencies.

Why are there no realistic stadium sounds in this year's game? No Vikings horn or Lions roars?
IC: As I mentioned in the previous question, this is one area that we weren't able to spend as much time on as we had originally hoped. It is definitely a priority for the future.

Teams still abandon the run way too early, even the run-heavy teams like the Panthers. How do you decide when a CPU team passes or runs?
IC: CPU playcalling uses a mixture of real life data and adaptive AI. A team like the Panthers will start out with its play calling percentages *exactly* mirroring real life. If they are really not succeeding in the run, they will try to mix it up more. Personally, I've seen many posts talking about how they love the fact that teams stick with the run even when they are down, more so than ever before, so I don't exactly know how widespread the above issue is that you mention.

Simming games works, but if I play a game I can't get Madden to mimic realistic defensive stats. Are there sliders and game clock settings you recommend for true stats?
IC: Typically, 12-minute quarters on All-Pro difficulty will provide the most realistic stats. Slider settings are so subjective, I don't even want to comment on those really. To each his own!

Linebackers still make way too many plays in the passing game, probably one pick per game. Why is this still a problem?
IC: I'm personally not seeing that many…so it could just be in differing styles of play. But this question does make me want to think about it so I'll check into our game logs and see if it truly is a widespread issue. ◆



Games

Repelling the Alien Invasion of Earth

Square Enix's XBLA Title

We all know what to do whenever aliens invade Earth: Start kicking ass. Square Enix's title Zero Day: Attack on Earth hits Xbox Live Arcade sometime soon, and while the game features the same dual-analog shooting mechanics we've seen many times before, its detailed cityscapes provide cool environments for the carnage. Attack on Earth takes place over 21 stages in cities all across the planet, including Tokyo and New York.

As a pilot trying to repel the invasion, you'll work with AI ships to take down a variety of alien craft that range in size from snub fighters to giant motherships with multi-stage defenses. On the ground, four-legged land walkers can blow through the buildings in their way. Mysterious black clouds shroud the map and cause damage to all that go near.

Attack on Earth also features four to eight-player multiplayer which will take place on the same screen, a versus mode, over 50 ships to choose from, multiple weapon loadouts, and more. » *by Matthew Kato with contributions from Meagan VanBurkleo*

FiveQuestions With **Sean Velasco** Lead Designer of A Boy And His Blob

Go to gameinformer.com
for our full chat with Sean Velasco.

① How did this project initially come together?
We originally started brewing ideas about a new A Boy and His Blob game with a soft feel and brand new gameplay. Since Majesco and WayForward have some history, we pulled a great pitch together and they jumped at it. Majesco has been awesome to work with, and it's to their credit that the game has stayed so close to the original vision.

② Deciding the bean roster for each level had to be a tricky process. Are you confident that QA plugged up the workarounds for the puzzles?
Half the time, we would get angry and say, "OK, we have to fix that!" But the other half, we would say, "I suppose that's one way to do it!" and leave it as it was. Some tricky puzzles had many revisions to make sure they were solved as the designers had intended. The boy and blob are a pretty slippery pair.

③ What blob forms missed the final cut?
I don't want to give out too many of our best ideas, in case we need to use them in the future! However, we had some early ideas that we decided not to put in. Among them were violent items like a pineapple grenade and a cream whip. We also thought of a multipurpose rope that the boy could use to lasso enemies or tightrope walk across gaps.

④ It sounds like the boy is voiced by a real kid. From the credits it looks like the actors are related to a developer.
You are right on the money. Our lead programmer's sons, Justin and Kanin Koshak, lent their voices to the boy. We brought them in to do placeholder recordings, but they ended up being so perfect that we went with them for the final version. They are awesome!

⑤ How did the idea for a hug button come about? It's too cute!
The hug button was originally part of a larger emotion system that we had planned for the game. Managing the blob's emotions and keeping him happy ended up being a hassle for the player, so we took most of that stuff out. However, the hug was just too heart melting to ignore, so we kept it in. » *Interview by Bryan Vore*

Heroes and Villains

Champions Online successfully launches with few tech issues and a great hero creator, but is it anything more than a pretty costume? *by Adam Biessener*

The EverQuest/WoW-style superhero MMORPG Champions Online is laser focused on one particular cross-section of nerd culture, and it hits that target to the exclusion of all others. The comic reader who sticks with Marvel through its mad continuity-desecrating digressions, the TV watcher who records *Heroes* week after week in spite of its aimless plot, and the MMO subscriber who grinds out levels to get through yawning content gaps: These are the players that Champions will not disappoint.

I don't mean to insult the dedication of devoted fans of the superheroic – in the context of this discussion, my house is created entirely of glass. The point is that more than anything else, Champions is a celebration of a certain set of aesthetics and the power fantasies surrounding them. A shocking proportion of "Man, I wish I could do that in a game!" moments from comics are supported and encouraged in Champions. Developer Cryptic's love of the subject matter shines through in small ways around every corner. "Bam!" and "Zap!" sound effect balloons denote what kind of super attack an opponent is charging up. Flight isn't just in the game – it's available directly after the tutorial and comes in several different flavors.

Once you move outside the realm of fandom, however, Champions' rough edges become unavoidable. Many lingering buffs and debuffs have placeholder UI icons. Tooltips and explanatory information windows are barely-formatted messes more often than not. Content gaps enforce grinding or taking on over-level missions to continue your hero's progression, especially if you play primarily in groups in this…ahem… massively multiplayer game.

Combat is a dichotomy. Battles are at once wondrous pyrotechnic interplays between dozens of fantastic powers and sloppy button-mashing train wrecks. Instead of a traditional MMO auto-attack, an energy-building power lets you work up to more powerful strikes. With everything tied into animations and cooldowns, there is often a delay imposed between inputting an action and having it take effect that goes well beyond typical online latency. It's not impossible to work around, but it does feel noticeably less responsive than a system like in Warcraft.

Hero creation is an unparalleled creative exercise (until APB releases, anyway), both in looks and power sets. Nearly any concept imaginable can be implemented in the game, and min/maxers are having a field day exploring the myriad combinations of powers that the classless, freeform progression system supports. On the other hand, it's very easy to gimp your hero into unplayability if you don't spend a fair amount of time reading up on which stats tie into which powers and whether or not that cool-sounding ability lives up to its promise. Champions does players a favor by letting them try out powers on their character in a Danger Room-esque setting before committing to the changes, but once you've done so the respecialization costs are crippling. Cryptic's heavy-handed approach to balance changes so far does not inspire confidence, either – an awesome power today could be a weak waste of a slot tomorrow.

Champions Online is not a terrible game. It's often frustrating, incomplete, and buggy, but rarely broken. It is stellar fan service from top to bottom, and occasionally surprises with a piece of content that would be outstanding in any game. I will be surprised, however, if general MMO fans who don't owe allegiance to brightly colored spandex find it worth their time to stick with the game much beyond the admittedly amazing hero creator. ◆

Gaming Invades Facebook

Can the social networking giant satisfy demanding gamers?

by Jeff Marchiafava

Facebook is great for creating a network of friends, sharing photos, and swapping awkward messages with relatives you didn't even know owned a computer. But buried amongst the virtual gifts, personality quizzes, and chain-letter surveys that comprise the majority of Facebook's applications is a cache of games that get more play than most console titles on the market. Here's a quick rundown of everything you need to know.

Are These Games Worth A Damn?

Many hardcore gamers dismiss Facebook's offerings as simplistic Flash-based timewasters aimed at the casual market – and they're right more often than not. After playing countless games on Facebook, only a few felt worthy of bookmarking for return visits. Gameplay patterns started to emerge; popular titles like Mafia Wars and Farm Town boil down to endless item collecting or amassing virtual wealth, with your progress hampered by a timing mechanism that requires you to check back frequently. Other games, such as Bejeweled Blitz and Tetris Friends, tap classic game formulas and can be replayed infinitely, while games like Typing Maniac and Geo Challenge might even make you smarter while you play. Most games, however, are light on challenge and designed to be played in short bursts, which make them tempting distractions between email exchanges and meetings, but not something that will compete with the library of console/PC titles most gamers already have in their living rooms.

Why Are They Popular?

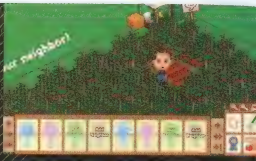
While simple Flash games saturate the Internet, Facebook's games transcend the competition by directly integrating into your social network. No messing with Gamertags or Friend Codes, no convincing your friends to buy a game to play with you, not even a prerequisite download to your hard drive – all games on Facebook are playable with the click of a button, and you already have your friends list ready to go. Not surprisingly, the most widely played games on Facebook are the ones that ask, encourage, and sometimes downright pester you to invite your friends to join in on the fun, or to post notifications of your achievements to your Facebook wall. It also doesn't hurt that Facebook is already popular, with more than 250 million active users – almost half of which log on at least once a day. Facebook offers an unbeatable platform to game developers. Oh, and the games are free. That helps.

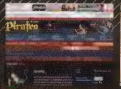
How Do They Make Money?

Game developers are experimenting with making money on Facebook in a variety of ways. Some use traditional ads; the spelling game Word Challenge, for instance, pops up picture ads at the end of games, while a similar word game called MonkWerks employs slightly more annoying video ads between rounds. Others like Pirates: Rule the Caribbean! and Mobsters 2: Vendetta use microtransactions, where players can acquire points to buy special items or power-ups. These can be purchased with a credit card or – in a somewhat shady move – by completing trials with participating companies. Unlike console games, which ask you to shill out extra cash for unlockable items, these points are almost always accrued through playing the game as well – with some limitations as to how many points can be earned in a day. Some games even allow you to unlock the full version (including the removal of those annoying ads) purely with the points you earn in the game. Paying for a game with the virtual currency you made by playing it? Sounds good to us.

Facebook games are still in their infancy, suffering the same growing pains that all new platforms face. But while the games available now are light on challenge and limited in scope, some are still a lot fun when played with friends – not to mention surprisingly addictive. With a user base that's almost as big as the population of the United States, you can bet big-name developers are taking notice of what Facebook has to offer. ◆

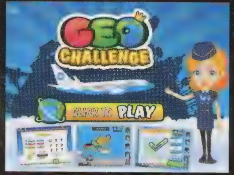
Check out our list of the best Facebook games, plus an interview with Monkey Gods CEO Jason Rubin at www.gameinformer.com/mag

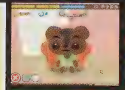


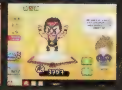


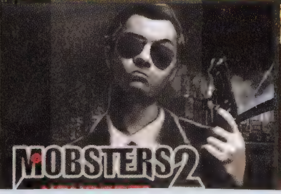
pet society

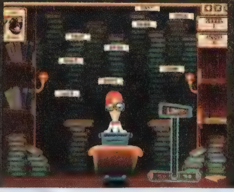
Final Score
Total
EXIT











By the Numbers

According to the latest numbers from Blizzard's press site, World of Warcraft has 11.5 monthly subscribers. These are the top games for Facebook, based on monthly active users.

- FarmVille (Zynga): 48.5 million
- Mafia Wars (Zynga): 25 million
- Farm Town (SlashKey): 18.5 million
- Pet Society (PlayFish): 18.2 million
- Texas Hold Em Poker (Zynga): 17.5 million

A Good Excuse To Play

A walk through any game aisle proves there are a ton of games designed for kids. The bigger issue is figuring out what kid-appropriate games are both fun for younger players and their game-playing parents. This month, I'm recommending some titles that are great for parents and kids to play together – without tempting either camp to reach for the "off" button. *by Jeff Cork*

Hasbro Family Game Night

Peggle

Toy Story Mania

Zack & Wiki

Peggle (available on PC, Xbox Live Arcade and Nintendo DS. Coming soon to PSN) has been both a media darling and fan favorite, and for good reason: It's dead simple to understand, but almost impossible to put down. Even the youngest players can press a button or two and see their actions translated into explosions of color and sound. Older kids (and their parents) can suss out some of the game's higher-level strategies, applying basic physics principles to their bounces as they knock pegs off the playing field.

Boom Blox and its sequel **Boom Blox Bash Party** (available on Wii) are more great games with hidden depth. Besides, who doesn't like knocking towers of stuff over? With both competitive and co-op challenges, the Boom Blox games are perfect for couch-based multiplayer. People who might not want to pick up the Wii remote can still point out strategies and tips for everyone else.

One of the best examples of single-player games that can also entertain a crowd is Capcom's severely underplayed **Zack & Wiki** (available on Wii). The adventure/puzzle game features adorable characters and tricky puzzles that engage everyone in the room. Even failure is depicted with charm and style — and you'll fail often. There are plenty of creative usages for the game's various objects, and shouting out ideas is a big part of the fun.

The characters from Marvel's super cute Marvel Superhero Squad toy line are getting a game from THQ, but I'd stay away from this repetitive and uninspired beat-'em-up. If your kids are into Marvel characters, **Marvel Ultimate Alliance** (available on Wii, PlayStation 2, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC) is worth checking out. It's rated T, but there's nothing particularly objectionable about it — though you should judge for yourself first. The roster of characters is huge, and there are plenty of cool special attacks and upgrades. Since the sequel is out now, the first one can be bought for a song.

If you're looking for something a bit more familiar, EA's **Hasbro Family Game Night** (available on Wii, DS, PlayStation 2, PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360) titles are perfect. They pack classic games like Connect Four, Yahtzee, and Battleship into faithful digital versions, along with enhanced updates that include things like power-ups. The sequel adds favorites like Operation and Jenga, with Mr. Potato Head returning as MC. ◆

A GUN BY ANY OTHER NAME...

If you're not comfortable with your kids blasting enemies with traditional firearms, here are three good games that pack in the action without the bullets and blood.

Water Warfare (E10+)
This downloadable WiiWare game exchanges the weapon loadouts found in traditional FPS games for squirt gun counterparts. It's a great game for multiplayer matches, but the solo action is lackluster.

Nerf N Strike 2 (E10+)
This game packs in upgradable weapons and selectable characters – and a real Nerf-gun shell for your Wii's remote. Parents who can look past the aggressive in-game marketing and don't mind dodging real darts should check it out.

Toy Story Mania (E)
Up to four players can play in a variety of shooting gallery challenges featuring the well-known characters from the films. It's silly and gimmicky at times (3D glasses are included), but Toy Story Mania is accessible action for four players.

3X 23600
3X 32000
3X 16700
PAUL
CHARLY
The Warriors: Street Brawl

Casual gaming, iPhones, and online services like XBLA and PSN are giving companies emerging markets to showcase their wares, and new kid on the block Paramount Digital Entertainment has been looking to break into the market since its inception early last year. The company has three games out now based on Paramount movie properties: The Warriors: Street Brawl (XBLA/PSN), Star Trek D-A-C (out now for XBLA and in coming in November for PSN and PC), and Top Gun (iPhone/iPod Touch).

We chatted with John Kavanagh, senior vice president of video games for Paramount Digital Entertainment about the famous movie studio's new ambitions.

feature

Gaming Becomes Paramount

A Legendary Film Studio Branches Out

Does PDE see itself working more in the mobile or XBLA/PSN-type spaces before jumping to full console video games?
We're a new studio and are learning about what works best on the industry's new digital distribution platforms. We started with iPhone titles, and now are also working on DLC games for XBLA, PSN, and P.C. We'll eventually add on full retail games when it's right for the game. We've learned important lessons from other new studios that burn bright quickly then fizzle out. Instead, we know we'll be successful by walking before we run.

What kind of development experience is PDE using for its games? Will all the development studios be in-house, or will it hire outside development to make its games?
Right now we are working with outside developers and have some great partners working with us on our games. We haven't yet made a decision on bringing development in house, but we will continue to evaluate our production strategies as the studio matures.

What will be the relationship between PDE and Paramount Pictures regarding the use of Paramount movie licenses for games? Will Paramount Pictures be free to take licenses to other game publishers?
The theatrical team has been very supportive of our group. We work closely with them to identify films that would translate well to games, and during the development process we work closely with them to make sure the games are staying true to the IP.

When deciding which titles to create from Paramount's vast library, we focus primarily on two elements. First of all, we ask ourselves if we can make a fun game out of this property. Next, we evaluate the current perception of the property. If it's a legacy title, we confirm that it would still be relevant for today's gamers. Once we've decided to create a game out of Paramount IP, we evaluate the best platforms and best way to develop the game. We absolutely consider taking the license to other game publishers, and we frequently do so. For example, Ubisoft is creating the game based on the upcoming movie *Tintin* and 505 Games is creating a Wii game based on *Grease*.

000191
FIRE
Top Gun

Star Trek D-A-C

With game budgets increasing and the competition in the video games market rising as well, what is going to make PDE successful above other companies? Are licenses enough?
Despite the current economic challenges everyone in the industry is facing, it's a great time to be starting out this studio. We have access to over 100 years of Paramount content and support from some of the most creative, prestigious filmmakers in the world. However while licensed content can be the foundation of great games, it is the responsibility of the developers and publishers to ensure that the game respects the property's storyline, and ultimately, is fun to play.

In the video game world, movie-licensed games have a bad reputation. Can PDE change that?
We want to make great games that people love to play. For us, the big difference will be in having early access to filmmakers in order to have more time and more exposure to the filmmakers to make sure we create games that best represent the IP. Oftentimes, publishers will obtain licenses at the later stages of a film's development, forcing them to rush to develop the game so that it comes out with the film's theatrical release. Being a part of the studio means we'll be able to get on board with a movie at the early stages of production. We're hoping to erase the bad reputation for movie-licensed games... at least for the games created by Paramount Digital Entertainment! » *Interview by Matthew Kato*

GAMEINFORMER

OneYearAgo

November 2008

THEN:
Activision announces that James Bond will become a yearly franchise whether a movie is coming or not.

NOW:
Quantum of Solace released last holiday to ho-hum reviews and never cracked the top 20 NPD sales charts. No new Bond games have been announced. Activision's license lasts through 2014.

THEN:
Konami filed a trademark for a game called Metal Gear Solid Existence. Strangely, Existence is the name of the third disc in MGS 3: Subsistence Limited Edition that contains all of the game's cutscenes edited into one giant movie.

NOW:
While Existence has yet to come to fruition, Konami revealed Metal Gear Solid: Peace Walker and Metal Gear Solid: Rising at E3.

THEN:
Square Enix offered to buy Tecmo, but was rebuffed by the Ninja Gaiden developer in favor of Koei.

NOW:
Still in a shopping mood, Square Enix bought Eidos for £84.3 million ($140 million) and has since renamed the publisher Square Enix Europe, which may or may not be final.

SQUARE ENIX EUROPE

Photo: Perry Zavitz

At Hothead Games, Ron Gilbert is looking to create a new hybrid of Diablo-style action/RPG and adventure gaming with the innovative DeathSpank

Monkey Island Creator Returns With DeathSpank

Ron Gilbert is legendary among PC gamers for his classic LucasArts adventure games, including Maniac Mansion and The Secret of Monkey Island. Recently, Gilbert has joined indie developer Hothead Games and is working on a new action/RPG named DeathSpank, which won accolades at the recent PAX convention in Seattle.

Obviously, Monkey Island and all the adventure games you did at LucasArts still have a tremendous cult following. What are some of your recollections of working with Tim Schafer and Dave Grossman on those games?
Both of them were very funny. Working on Monkey Island, we had a lot of fun with the game. It was a lot of sitting around and making jokes and laughing. Just throwing out lots of weird, funny ideas and seeing which ones stuck and which ones didn't. It's about having as much fun making the game as you want the people who are playing it to have. The biggest thing going on at Lucasfilm was that we couldn't make Star Wars games. They had licensed the video game rights off to a toy company. That gave us the freedom to explore completely different things. That's where things like Maniac Mansion and Monkey Island eventually came from.

You are very passionate about the indie games scene. Do you think that the mainstream, large-scale publishing business is broken in some respects?
I don't think it's fundamentally broken, I think that what the big game publishers – the Activisions and EAs and Ubisofts – need to do is embrace indie games. They need to look at these smaller games and fund them. The thing that scares me about the industry is that the large companies are extremely hit-driven. All they want to do is hit home runs. They don't quite understand that you need a lot of different games to make the industry healthy as a whole. I think the movie industry – and I think there are a lot of money grubbers there like in any big company – understands that the strength of their industry is actually better if they get a lot of these indie movies made. They use them to bring up acting talent and directing talent. That's something that the big game companies haven't quite gotten yet.

A great example would be Batman director Christopher Nolan. If you watched Memento, you'd never say, "This guy will go on to direct a movie that makes $600 million at the box office."
That's a perfect example of the types of things that the larger companies need to be doing. A lot of the film companies have indie film labels that put these movies out. EA needs to have an indie game label that has nothing to do with EA. Everything is done differently – the marketing, the sales, the production. They could really help foster a lot of these small groups of creative people out there. That would be healthy for the whole business.

You consulted with Hothead for a while, and decided to join the company. What attracted you to this company?
First of all, I really like the people a lot. When I was pitched DeathSpank to them, which I had pitching to a lot of different publishers, they really just got it. I told them the idea and how I wanted to do the art, and it immediately clicked for them. The people here are good people and are really funny. I just thought, "If I come here and make the game here, it's going to be really good."

When did you hit upon the idea for DeathSpank?
I'd been kicking it around for a while, four or five years now. I have a website and a friend of mine, Clayton Kauzlaric, had been making some Flash cartoons with me. They were poking fun at the game industry. In one of the cartoons, we needed a video game character. He needed to be over-the-top and have an absolutely ridiculous name. The name we came up with was "DeathSpank." So we created this character and he appeared in a couple of the cartoons. The more I thought about him, I began to really like him and I started to flesh out his world. What's his motivation? Who is he? Where does he come from? A lot of these stories started to flow out of that. So, I started putting together this little adventure game with him, and I knew I wanted to meld that with an RPG. That's when I started pitching it to publishers and eventually ended here at Hothead.

The game has a very unique visual style that melds 3D graphics with a 2D, almost pop-up book feel. Do you think the game industry misses an opportunity to explore different visual styles other than hyper-realistic characters?
I think there is a missed opportunity there. I think a lot of people making games today are very tech focused. They're very excited about the technology and how they are going to model realism – "We have a million blades of grass and they are all swaying to the wind correctly!" That's interesting at some level, but I think they might be missing this whole other piece, which is creating interesting characters and creating interesting worlds and stories. It's the technical versus creative sides of this thing. I wanted to do DeathSpank the way it is because I like 2D art. I love when an artist can get in and massage every little pixel of a piece. But I also think roaming a real, 3D world is really interesting because it allows the player to explore and have it feel continuous. So, the goal was to get those things together.

The trailers are very focused on action, but I'm assuming the game has a strong adventure element to it as well.
Definitely. There's a very good, strong adventure game component that runs through the game. We don't really touch on that in the action-packed trailer. There's Monkey Island-style dialogue and there's all these people you can interact with and have conversations with. There are adventure game puzzles very much like the Monkey Island stuff that you can go through and solve. The game has this wave to it. At some point, you're just solving adventure game puzzles, then all of a sudden all this action happens. Then you go back to solving puzzles. The world is very nonlinear. It's not like we take you through like, "Level one you fight. Level two you solve a puzzle. Level three you fight." You do as much of it as you want and roam the world at your own pace.

You outed yourself as a WoW addict during your keynote at the PAX convention. Has playing that much WoW influenced you as a game designer?
Well, it's sucked up thousands of hours of my life. [Laughs] But you're talking how it's influenced me positively. I think that WoW is a brilliantly designed game. I will be playing the game and I will just stop and think about it for a while. The way that everything dovetails in – all the different items you can find, all the crafting and the different professions, all the stats and uses for items, and how it's all balanced and put together. It's awe-inspiring to me to think of how much work went into all this. There's a lot to admire about how they do quest structures and tell a story, the way they let the world tell the story.

I know you haven't announced what platforms DeathSpank is coming out for, but Xbox Live Arcade has given an avenue to games like Braid and Castle Crashers that may have struggled in the traditional, disc-based publishing realm.
I think Xbox Live Arcade is great, and I think you're right. Castle Crashers may not have been able to exist as a retail product. It does give people a great avenue for that kind of stuff. My hope is that they really grow that service, so there are literally hundreds of games that I can get there. I think the Apple Apps store is a really great model. They have their problems, but it's very open and a lot of people can get their stuff on there. The barrier to entry on the App Store isn't as great as it is on Xbox Live Arcade. I'm just using Xbox Live as an example. WiiWare and PSN are exactly the same; they really do allow a channel for a different type of game.

» interview by Matt Helgeson

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1983 COMPUTER WHIZ

As a college student, Gilbert writes a computer program named Graphics Basics. He sells the software to the tech company HESware, where he takes a full-time position programming games

1984 THE FORCE

Gilbert takes a position at Lucasfilm Games, where he works primarily on games for the Commodore 64 home computer

1985 BIG BREAK

Lucasfilm gives Gilbert a chance to develop a new, all-original game. With artist Gary Winnick, he creates Maniac Mansion, a humorous adventure game that features the wacky characters and sly dialogue that would become Gilbert's trademark. The game is also famous for being the debut of Gilbert's original scripting language SCUMM

1990 MASTERPIECE

With Tim Schafer and Dave Grossman, Gilbert crafts a bona fide classic in The Secret of Monkey Island, considered one of the greatest graphic adventures of all time. The game was recently re-done and re-released for Xbox Live Arcade

1992 NEW BEGINNINGS

After a successful Monkey Island sequel, Gilbert leaves LucasArts to found Humongous Entertainment, a company focused on creating high-quality adventure games for children

1995 LET THE DOGS OUT

Gilbert starts a new, adult-oriented label at Humongous, Cavedog Entertainment. The company has success with the RTS Total Annihilation, but falls victim to parent company GT Interactive's purchase by Infogrames

2008 TEMPERATURE RISING

After a successful career as a consultant, Gilbert joins Hothead Games as creative director and begins work on DeathSpank

2009 BUILDING BUZZ

Gilbert delivers a warmly received speech at the annual PAX convention. DeathSpank quickly becomes one of the most buzzed-about titles at the show

SONY
editor's choice
f
g

Screen Deep Beauty

Game Informer's Definitive Gaming TV Roundup

Tired of playing Halo split-screen and squinting at a window the size of your controller? Television technology has come a long way since you bought that TV off your college roommate; maybe it's finally time to upgrade. We've rounded up some of the hottest 1080p HDTVs on the market and paired them with the biggest games of yesterday and tomorrow. Use our handy price guide to narrow down which one is right for you. (Prices listed are indicative of online quotes, and don't necessarily represent the MSRP.)

The Cheap Seats

For those who want the most bang for their buck

a Sharp Aquos 40" LC-40E77UN

AVERAGE

Pro: The Aquos lives up to its name with an image so razor sharp you could use it for shaving. The stutter free image is great for games. We dug the feel of the system's ergonomic remote, and moving day should be a little easier given this set's super light weight. **Con:** Though you'll likely only have to deal with it once, setting the Aquos on its stand is a complicated process. We missed the lack of quick options for setting color temperature, but at least you won't have to worry about disturbing your neighbors with late night Rock Band parties thanks to the Aquos' wimpy speakers.

$869.99
www.sharpusa.com

b Sony Bravia 32" KDL-32XBR9

VERY GOOD

Pro: Sony's little beast stacked up well against the big boys, producing deeper blacks than most of the rest of the group while providing fairly accurate color reproduction. Uncharted 2 looked as good as we've ever seen it on both of Sony's super clean sets. **Con:** The 32" Bravia only cycles through pictures at 120Hz, but the difference in blur effects were almost negligible. We also miss some of the universal remote functions found on the 40" model. Given its price and performance this will likely be the best option for many, but wouldn't it be nice to have a bigger picture?

$739.99
www.sonystyle.com

c Vizio 42" SV421XVT

LIMITED APPEAL

Pro: The colors of Borderland's distopian wasteland really popped on the Vizio, and we only noticed a small amount of graininess. Handles on the top of the unit come in handy while trying to perfect your living room's feng shui. **Con:** The graininess we noticed on the Vizio was negligible for a TV at this price, but you'll likely hear some complaints during family movie night due to the unit's poor off-angle viewing. Like an aging lawyer's beard, the black levels on this display have a few gray hairs.

$899.99
www.vizio.com

The Next Step

For those who want a TV with a little something extra

d LG 47" 47LH90

VERY GOOD

Pro: LG's big, crystal-clear screen is great for watching movies. Gorgeous color reproduction is aided by a built-in sensor that adjusts the LCD's backlighting in tune with the changing light levels of your room. It's also super handy to save multiple color settings to different inputs. For those worried about aesthetics and sound, the hidden speakers have good audio output and still retain the unit's sleek design. **Con:** A lack of online options is disappointing, and so is this screen's off-angle performance. More frustrating is the moderate amount of ghosting we noticed while playing Metal Gear Solid 4.

$1,499.95
www.lge.com/us

e Panasonic 50" TC-P50G10

LIMITED APPEAL

Pro: Panasonic's Viera Cast technology is great for streaming YouTube videos, retrieving weather and sports news, and downloading Amazon videos on demand. A built-in SD slot even lets you turn the tables on your grandparents and start torturing them with vacation slideshows. **Con:** Enlist a friend to help set this bad boy up, since installing the base entails some complicated heavy maneuvering, which is more problematic than the Aquos given this unit's extra heft. Our biggest problems with this TV, however, were its muted black levels and a grainy display that made our *Watchmen* Blu-ray look like it was filmed in the middle of a sandstorm.

$1,399.99
www.panasonic.com

f Editor's Choice

Sony Bravia 40" KDL-40XBR9

OUTSTANDING

Pro: Sony's 40" model looks as sharp as its little brother, plus it has some notable extras. The bump up to 240Hz helps eliminate some of the judder we noticed on the smaller set. Online features let you download videos from *Sports Illustrated*, *Wired*, and YouTube while checking the weather or your stock portfolio. To top it off, this Bravia was the only TV we tested with built-in Netflix support. **Con:** We could tell you that some of the lighter shades of the Bravia's blacks are tinged blue, but there is little else to complain about.

$1,349.99
www.sonystyle.com

Luxury Living

For those who line their birdcages with $100 bills

g Samsung 46" UN46B8000

SUPERB

Pro: Samsung's Series 8 is so sexy it could turn heads on a Paris runway. The unit is only about as thick as a deck of cards, and the screen itself is so beautiful and bright you might need sunglasses. Its blacks, on the other hand, let out about as much light as a black hole. Online widgets and USB ports for digital cameras and MP3 players make the Series 8 the centerpiece for all your parties. **Con:** Given the system's price tag, we feel like WiFi should have been built in (right now you have to buy a USB adaptor for $79.99). The Series 8's remote is so unresponsive and chintzy we wonder if Samsung bought them in bulk from Wal-Mart.

$2,289.99
www.samsung.com/us

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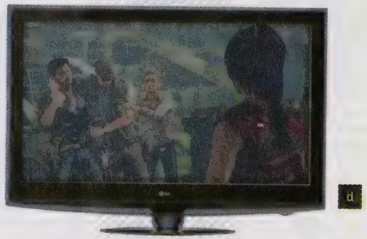
* *Simulated screen images*



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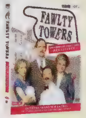
MEDIA SHELF

ADULT SWIM IN A BOX

ADULT SWIM IN A BOX

This 12-DVD box set holds some of the funniest seasons of Adult Swim's most popular shows, including *Aqua Teen Hunger Force*, *Space Ghost Coast to Coast*, and *Sealab 2021*. Also included is a bonus DVD of unaired, new show pilots.

$69.98; www.williamsstreet.com



FAWLTY TOWERS REMASTERED

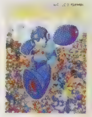
John Cleese, in his seminal role as Basil Fawlty, is a put-upon manager of a hotel where everything goes wrong in this sitcom that helped define British comedy.

$49.98; www.bbcamericashop.com

HALO 3: ODST SOUNDTRACK

Halo composers Martin O'Donnell and Michael Salvatori return for ODST, combining sweeping ambient synth effects and driving rhythms with ethereal sci-fi melodies. This time, they add unique noir overtones to the mix.

$15.98; www.sumthing.com



MEGA MAN: OFFICIAL COMPLETE WORKS

With over 100 games in more than 20 years, you know Mega Man has been a busy guy. Udon's new art book features all the character designs, box art, and promotional materials that made those games possible.

$39.99; www.udonentertainment.com

EMERGENT GAMEPLAY

Beating the Game Developer at Their Own Game

y Jeremiah Slaczka
Creative Director/
Co-Founder,
5th Cell

Industry buzzwords typically bore me. They're usually just another gimmick for some sales person to sell a re-hashed sequel as the next shiny "must have" holiday purchase. But every once in a while these terms can define the next evolutionary step in a medium. "Emergent gameplay" is a buzzword with some meat; it is a core game concept that's been around almost as long as games (video or other) have. Now, in an age where video games are on every electronic platform known to man, emergent gameplay is finally getting the same focus and attention as the more traditional genres. But wait, it's not even a genre! Or is it?

Simply put, emergent gameplay is a relevant user experience that is not pre-determined or known by the game's creator. Relevant is the key word here. You can pick up Madden 2010 and pretend your QB is the next spiky-haired protagonist in an upcoming JRPG, but that's not emergent. Emergent is not just imagination, though it takes imagination from its users to actually experience it. No, a truly emergent game absolutely requires imagination, providing the players with a goal but forcing them to forge their own path to that goal. But this creative process has to have purpose – otherwise it's not what one would classify as a game.

The renewed focus on emergent games mirrors the trend that is occurring within the greater media scene. With the advent of YouTube, MySpace, and Facebook, users have a new appetite for participating in entertainment in a custom way, not just following a script or observing as was the norm in the past. If someone wants to draw an ugly purple gothic skeleton and plaster it on their MySpace page, who is going to stop them? If a gamer wants to glue a plank to the main character's hat, jump on a unicycle and knock an enemy out of a tree to win the level, who are we to tell them no?

The easiest way for me to explain this concept is to use my own experience in developing Scribblenauts, a game that showcases emergent gameplay in a new and unique way. Most games force the user to use their very limited toolset, which the game developers hone down to make the experience as interesting as possible. Open world games boast freedom, but this usually only amounts to distance and space, not interaction or choice. Some RPGs flaunt freedom of choice with morality systems, but ultimately these choices are largely black and white. Scribblenauts aimed to set the bar beyond any of those experiences by providing the user with an unlimited toolset (words, which are visually represented as their real-world counterparts), and focusing on refining those tools to behave as they would in real life. By doing so, and by creating open scenarios, we enable the user to use their imagination to come up with their own solutions to challenges in the game.

Of course, Scribblenauts isn't the only game out there that focuses on emergent gameplay. Titles like Garry's Mod, Spore for PC, and LittleBigPlanet for PS3 have used emergent gameplay to allow users to create and share completely new experiences with friends and strangers by using new objects, AI, and even levels with unique gameplay.

The foundation of Scribblenauts is a tool called Objectnaut. Objectnaut controls the properties and behaviors of everything within the game. The tool is based on the concept of data inheritance. It would be impossible to individually program and assign properties to everything in the game. So we broke down our entire world into categories. What do mammals and humans have in common? Well...they're made of flesh. That's a start. Both categories are sentient, sure. We assigned the big picture properties of everything based on their category, and then went through the objects and refined them with the unique properties. We had designers sit there and ask themselves, "Is it buoyant? Can it swim? At what temperature does it turn to a liquid? Can it be frozen?" For the AI we asked, "What kind of personality does it have? What does it like, what does it eat, and what is it afraid of?"

This resulted in an experience that is defined by each user's own problem solving skills, imagination, and method of handling challenges. My toolset will be completely different than someone else's toolset. We're able to see the user's personalities shine forth through which objects they use, or which ones they don't use. Do they solve the level through direct confrontation or try to find a passive solution? People want to be challenged. Games as early as chess forced players to think creatively to overcome their obstacles. That is why emergent gameplay resonates so well with players.

No one knows the future of game development, but emergent gameplay will only continue to push itself into the forefront of game design. Designers will use it in ways Scribblenauts only suggested at by moving beyond just having a vast object toolset and into the realm of emergent personality, story, and depth. While far more complicated, I'd still like to give the impossible a shot. I'm constantly surprised by players coming up with situations I've never dreamed of or seen during the entire development cycle. It's a very wonderful experience to be stumped by your own game.

The views and opinions expressed on this page are strictly those of the author and not necessarily those of Game Informer Magazine or its staff.

■ ■ ■

If you work in the industry and would like to share your opinion, contact senior editor Matt Helgeson at matt@gameinformer.com

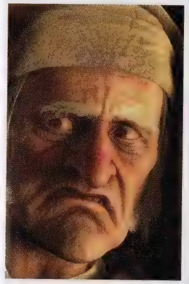
NOV
2009

03 tue

New Releases
- Academy of Champions: Soccer *(Wii)*
- Band Hero *(PS3, 360, Wii, PS2)*
- COP: The Recruit *(DS)*
- Dragon Age: Origins *(360, PC)*
- Food Network: Cook or Be Cooked *(DS)*
- Formula One 2009 *(Wii, PSP)*
- Ghostbusters *(PSP)*
- Jak & Daxter: The Lost Frontier *(PSP)*
- Pro Evolution Soccer 2010 *(PS3, 360, Wii, PS2, PSP)*
- Rabbids Go Home *(Wii, DS)*
- LEGO Rock Band *(PS3, 360, Wii, DS)*
- Silent Hill: Shattered Memories *(Wii, PS2, PSP)*
- SOCOM: U.S. Navy SEALs Fireteam Bravo 3 *(PSP)*
- SpongeBob SquarePants: Truth or Dare *(360, Wii, PSP, DS)*
- Star Wars: Battlefront Elite Squad *(PSP)*
- Star Wars: The Force Unleashed: Ultimate Sith Edition *(PS3, 360)*
- We Cheer 2 *(Wii)*

Band Hero

06 fri



Humbug!
Jim Carrey is gunning for the holiday spirit triple crown. He's already played the Grinch, and today he stars as Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*. He just has to play Tim Allen to secure his place in history.

10 tue

New Releases
- Band Hero *(DS)*
- Buzz! Quiz World *(PS3)*
- Call of Duty: Modern Warfare Mobilized *(DS)*
- Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 *(PS3, 360)*
- Chaotic: Shadow Warriors *(PS3, Wii, DS)*
- Dragon Ball Z: Attack of the Saiyans *(DS)*
- Dragon Ball Z: Raging Blast *(PS3, 360)*
- Harvest Moon: Sunshine Islands *(DS)*
- Sakura Wars: So Long, My Love *(Wii)*
- Samurai Shodown: Edge of Destiny *(360)*
- Shaun White Snowboarding: World Stage *(Wii)*
- SingStar Motown *(PS3, PS2)*
- Sky Crawlers: Innocent Aces *(Wii)*
- Sushi Go Round *(Wii, DS)*

Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2

11 wed

Black Magic
Final Fantasy IX draws mixed reactions from role-playing faithful, but no one in their right mind can deny the coolness of black mage Vivi. This beloved character is coming to Square's long-running Play Arts action figure series this month! He's going to go fast, so call your retailers for availability.

13 fri

I Can't Let You Do That
Set two years after *2010: A Space Odyssey*, Joan Cusack stars in *2012* as a plucky young girl from the Bronx trying to find love on a monolith bound for the center of the sun. Wait… It's John Cusack? Well if that's the case, the movie is about a plucky young girl from the Bronx falling in love with John Cusack.

17 tue

New Releases
- Assassin's Creed: Bloodlines *(PSP)*
- Assassin's Creed II *(PS3, 360, PC)*
- EA Sports Active: More Workouts *(Wii)*
- Karaoke Revolution *(PS3, 360, Wii)*
- Left 4 Dead 2 *(360, PC)*
- LEGO Indiana Jones 2: The Adventure Continues *(PS3, 360, Wii, PSP, DS)*
- LittleBigPlanet *(PSP)*
- Need for Speed: Nitro *(Wii, DS)*
- Planet 51 *(PS3, 360, Wii, DS)*
- Playmobil Circus *(Wii)*
- Playmobil Knights *(DS)*
- Princess and the Frog *(Wii, PC, DS)*
- Resident Evil: Darkside Chronicles *(Wii)*
- Scene It: Bright Lights Big Screen *(PS3, 360, Wii)*
- The Sims 3: World Adventures *(PC)*
- Tony Hawk: Ride *(PS3, 360, Wii)*
- Yu-Gi-Oh! 5D's Tag Force 4 *(PSP)*

LittleBigPlanet

18 wed

Braaaaiinss
The grim reaper has visited the Marvel universe several times this year, and now he's pointing his scythe at Iron Man. In *Invincible Iron Man* issue 20, a risky procedure leaves Tony Stark brain dead. Will he survive? Will he inherit the memories of someone else? We can't wait to find out!

20 fri

Don't Let Your Girlfriend Drag You Along
Today, Sexy Dracula and some girl star in the *Twilight* sequel, *New Moon*. This one has werewolves, depressed teenagers, and state-of-the-art sparkle effects. Sounds like a great way to waste two hours of a life.

24 tue

New Releases
- James Cameron's Avatar *(PS3, 360, Wii, PSP, DS, PC)*
- Tekken 6 *(PSP)*
- Your Shape *(Wii)*

25 wed

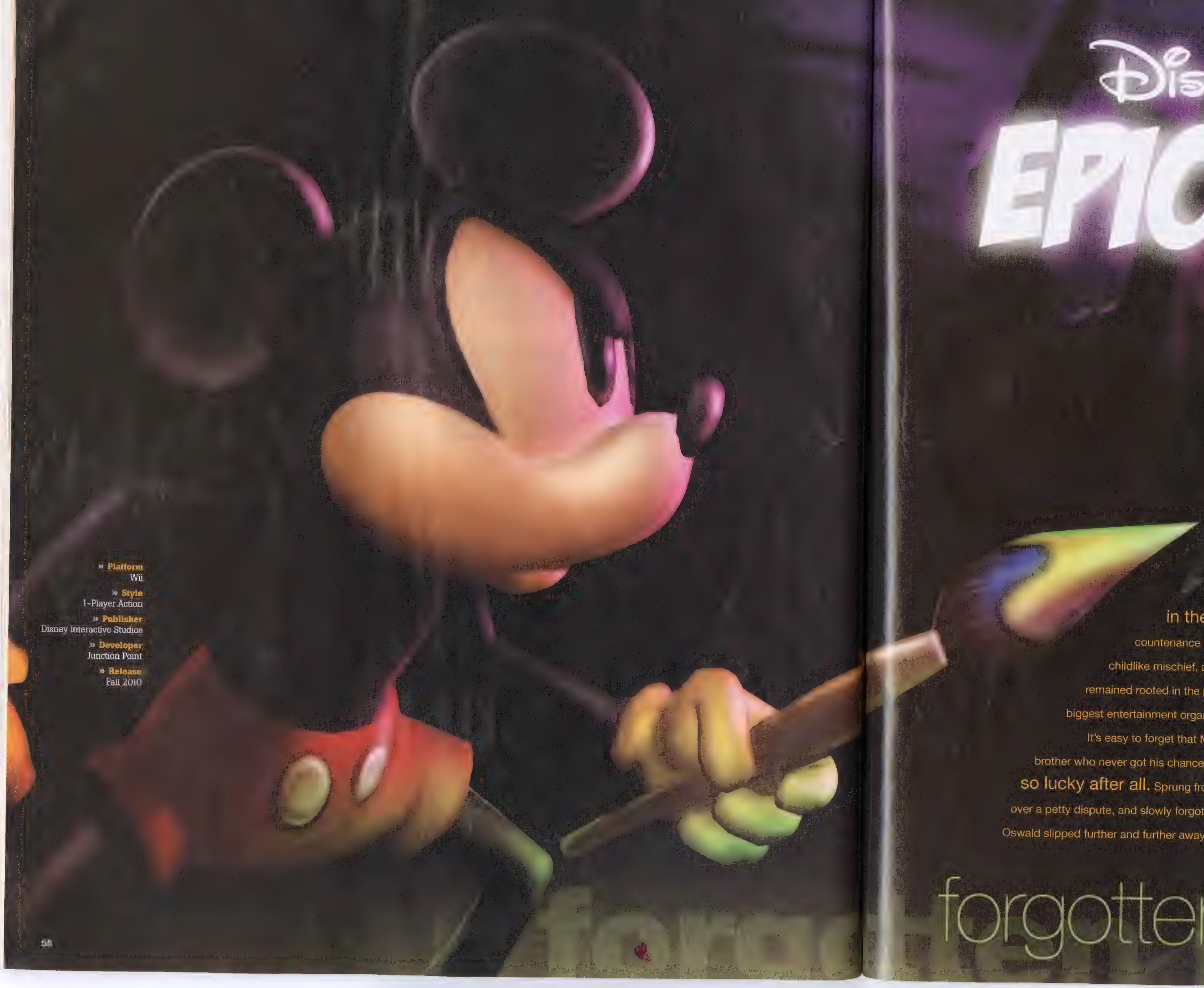
Supes Going Strong
In *Superman* issue 694, Mon-El returns Metropolis to end Bizarro's rampage. We're hoping the fashion police show up to strip him clean of his new costume. This may seem like a throwaway comic story, but its events bleed into issue 700 – a story we're told will make fans gasp.

27 fri

Most Redundant Title Ever
Ninja Assassin opens in theaters today. We hope it doesn't have a plot. We want to see ninjas doing cool ninja stuff, especially chucking stars! There better be lots of wire-fu, close-ups of grappling hooks, and a finale where the ninjas work together to keep greedy tycoons from closing their ninja school.

30 mon

Spend More on WoW
This month, World of Warcraft's action figures return for a fifth series. This line consists of a night elf hunter, Alliance hero, gnome warlock, and a orc warchief. Also, keep your eyes peeled for Illidan's demon form!



» Platform
Wii
» Style
1-Player Action
» Publisher
Disney Interactive Studios
» Developer
Junction Point
» Release
Fall 2010

Disney EPIC MICKEY

by Matt Miller

Mickey Mouse was the biggest star in the world. In the 1930s, nearly everyone recognized the rounded ears and cheerful countenance of Walt Disney's favorite creation. The little cartoon hero was a reminder of simple fun, childlike mischief, and clever humor in an era of unbearable economic depression. In the years that followed, he remained rooted in the public consciousness, starring in movies and comics, and becoming the face of one of the biggest entertainment organizations in history.

It's easy to forget that Mickey was not Walt Disney's first iconic cartoon character – that Mickey had an older brother who never got his chance at the limelight. Oswald the Lucky Rabbit didn't turn out to be so lucky after all. Sprung from Disney's imagination before Mickey ever existed, Oswald was lost to the company over a petty dispute, and slowly forgotten by the public as the decades passed. As Mickey Mouse soared into popularity, Oswald slipped further and further away into a wasteland of forgotten cartoon icons. Until now.

forgotten heroes

Dwellers in the Wasteland

The lives of Mickey Mouse and Oswald the Lucky Rabbit may seem strange subject matter for one of the most lauded game developers in the world. Warren Spector helped to shape the landscape of electronic gaming throughout the last two decades, from his involvement in franchises like Ultima, Wing Commander, System Shock, and Thief, to the groundbreaking Deus Ex. From those frequently edgy, experimental projects, it seems an odd shift in gears to tackle Mickey, a character identified with saccharine sweetness and innocuous simplicity. At least, that's the way Spector felt when Disney approached him about creating a new Mickey Mouse game. "They said, 'What do you think about Mickey Mouse? Would you be interested in doing a Mickey Mouse game?' And I said, 'No! Because I don't do games for kids,'" Spector tells us as we sit down with him in his Austin, Texas office. "'You've done an incredibly good job of making Mickey lame and irrelevant to anybody over the age of eight over the last 30 years. I don't do games for kids.'"

Disney, too, had realized the decreasing presence of its company's icon in the media of the 21st century. This titanic star had been reduced in recent years to little more than a smiling mascot on lunchboxes and t-shirts. Mickey and his friends had been pushed aside for more relevant ventures from the likes of Pixar. Spector was amazed when the company came back after his initial refusal, eager to move the character in a new direction. It was all the more significant because they hoped to enact this revitalization in a video game. "They said, 'No, no, no! We want someone to reinvigorate this character, reinvent this character.' I literally said: 'You know, this is probably impossible, we're probably going to fail. I'm in.'"

The secret that so few even in the game industry knew was just how ensconced Spector already was in the mythology of Disney. His mind may have envisioned cyborg-filled dystopias and epic role-playing adventures, but his love of films and cartoons came far earlier. From a young age, Spector collected untold amounts of Disney paraphernalia, from rare books to impossible-to-find collector's toys. He completed his master's thesis at the University of Texas on the evolution of classic cartoon characters. Without realizing it, the folks at Disney happened upon the one visionary in the gaming world who knew as much about Mickey Mouse and his history as they did.

With the deal struck, Spector's new development studio, Junction Point, began work on Disney Epic Mickey, bringing the character into the 21st century. The trick was finding the source of the character – roots that had been forgotten behind a veneer of niceness and unoffending platitudes. "At some point they fractured his personality," Spector explains. "They took his mischievousness and his anger and need for revenge and gave it to Donald. They took his naive simplicity and gave it to Goofy. They took his loyalty and infinite affection and gave it to Pluto, of all things. They took his character and just shattered it, and all of a sudden he's kind of a straight man for the gang."

In the beginning, Mickey Mouse had a far more rascally streak. Mickey was a rambunctious and exciting fellow in early cartoons like *Steamboat Willie* and *Plane Crazy*, prone to insane antics and bad behavior. "Not the '50s suburban uncle, not the '40s version, which was trying to make him a little more adventurous, not the '30s leader of the gang, but go back to those late '20s, early '30s cartoons where he was mischievous," Spector says. "Mischievous is the nice way to put it. He was a badly behaved mouse. He was a troublemaker. He was always doing bad stuff." At the same time, there was always a core of joy, exploration, and enthusiasm that guided the character's adventures and mishaps. This is the Mickey Mouse that Spector and Junction Point want to bring back into the public consciousness.

To do so, there needed to be a story and setting that could pull Mickey from his comfortable fame and into a new locale of excitement and wonder. The key to that setup came in the form of Oswald the Lucky Rabbit. Oswald was created and animated into several silent, black and white cartoons in the 1920s, before Walt Disney's animation studio had become a household name. In 1928, the financier and distributor behind the Oswald cartoons decided to test Walt Disney's mettle, threatening to take the character away if Disney wouldn't agree to dramatically reduced budgets for future films. Disney called the bluff, leaving behind his dear Lucky Rabbit and beginning anew with Mickey Mouse, finding enormous success in the process. Oswald remained behind, remembered by few. This real life drama from the early days of the Walt Disney Company doubles as a fantastic mythology around which Junction Point could build a game. "Walt Disney created Mickey to replace Oswald," Spector says. "I figured: what a great starting point for a story! An older brother, rejected by his dad, in favor of a younger brother who stole the life that should have been his."

In the analogous fiction of Epic Mickey, the sorcerer Yensid (spell it backwards) crafts a beautiful world for his forgotten creations, and Oswald is its earliest resident. This wondrous place bears an uncanny similarity to a certain Disney theme park and its many attractions, and sits on a table in the sorcerer's study as an intricate model. Stepping through a magic mirror from his home, Mickey stumbles into Yensid's study and becomes fascinated with the elaborate set. Ever the troublemaker, Mickey waits for Yensid to leave, and proceeds to fiddle with the model, accidentally spilling paint and paint thinner all over the newly minted world. Hearing the sorcerer's return and fearing discovery, Mickey

MICKEY MOUSE

"I want to make him a hero...and I want to remind him that it's okay to behave badly," Spector says of his game's hero. Mickey caused the problems in the Wasteland, and now he's been pulled into its twisted landscape. He's adventurous, enthusiastic, and curious, but many of his other traits are formed by the player's choices.

OSWALD THE LUCKY RABBIT

Mickey's older brother was lost and forgotten in the Wasteland years ago. Deeply resentful of his younger, more successful sibling, he nonetheless desires the things that Mickey has, from his stable of friends to the adoration of the masses. "All he really wants is to be loved by Walt Disney," Spector explains.

THE GREMLINS

Like Oswald, the gremlins are another forgotten creation of Disney. They harbor no love for the Phantom Blot. If Mickey chooses to help them, they will aid him in his journey. "In the end, the Blot won the war and pushed Oswald into hiding and exile," Spector says. "The gremlins are the only forces of good in the world that can continue to fight against the Blot." Their leader, a little guy named Gus, travels with Mickey and advises him as a sort of spirit guide, not unlike Pinocchio's Jiminy Cricket.

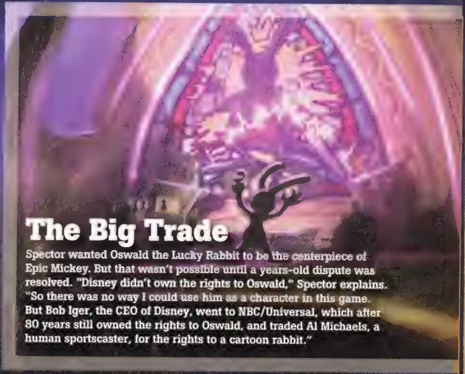
THE BUNNY KIDS

Oswald has been lucky in one regard, through his relationship with his girl, Ortensia. As Oswald is a rabbit, they've managed to pop out any number of cute little rabbit children, who happen to have a taste for devouring Blotlings. "These are going to be the breakout stars of the game. Mark my words," Spector predicts. Much to Oswald's chagrin, the bunny kids adore their Uncle Mickey.

THE BUDDIES

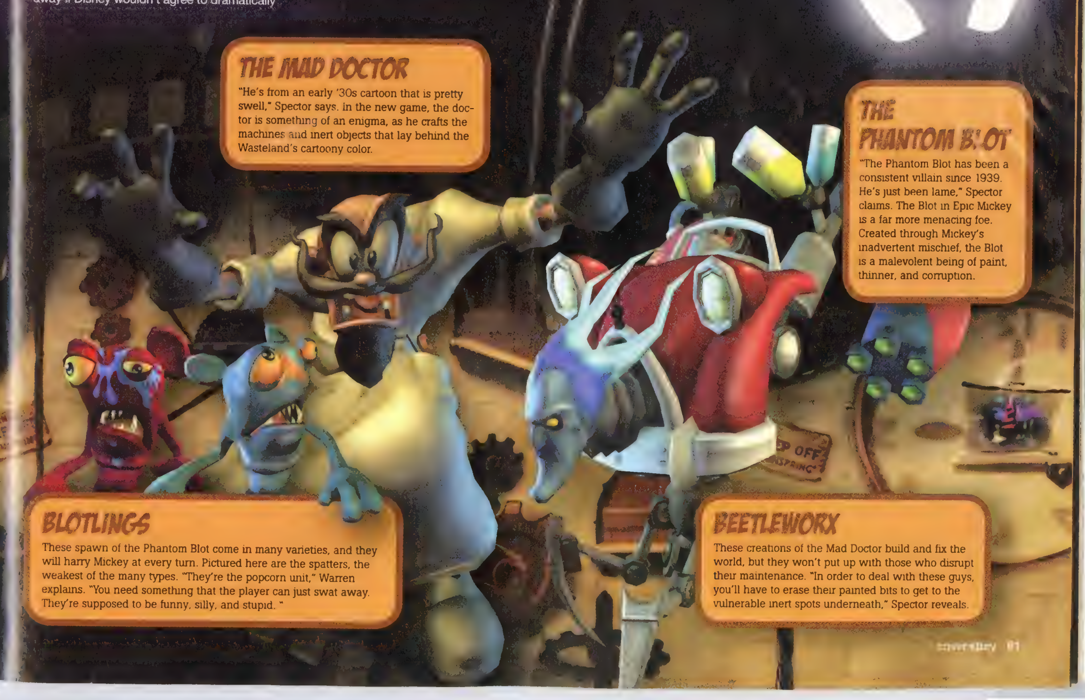
Unusual, mechanized versions of Mickey's familiar buddies populate the Wasteland. "Oswald is trying to recreate Mickey's life, so he has the Mad Doctor build these animatronic versions of his buddies," Spector says. In one level, the scattered body parts of a machine-like Donald wait to be recovered and reassembled.

> "This is probably impossible, we're probably going to fail. I'm in."
>
> —Warren Spector on reinventing Mickey Mouse



The Big Trade

Spector wanted Oswald the Lucky Rabbit to be the centerpiece of Epic Mickey. But that wasn't possible until a years-old dispute was resolved. "Disney didn't own the rights to Oswald," Spector explains. "So there was no way I could use him as a character in this game. But Bob Iger, the CEO of Disney, went to NBC/Universal, which after 80 years still owned the rights to Oswald, and traded Al Michaels, a human sportscaster, for the rights to a cartoon rabbit."



THE MAD DOCTOR

"He's from an early '30s cartoon that is pretty swell," Spector says. In the new game, the doctor is something of an enigma, as he crafts the machines and inert objects that lay behind the Wasteland's cartoony color.

THE PHANTOM BLOT

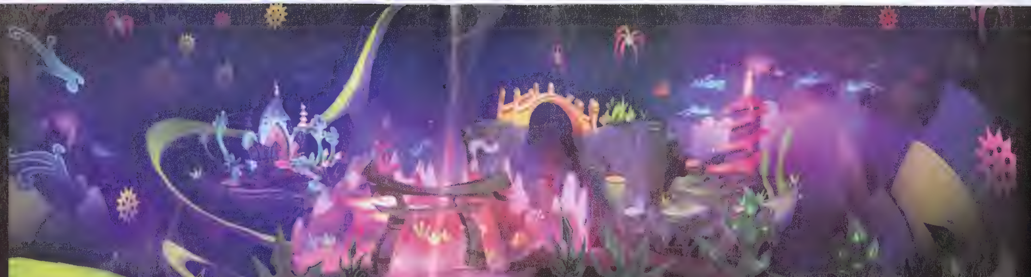
"The Phantom Blot has been a consistent villain since 1939. He's just been lame," Spector claims. The Blot in Epic Mickey is a far more menacing foe. Created through Mickey's inadvertent mischief, the Blot is a malevolent being of paint, thinner, and corruption.

BLOTLINGS

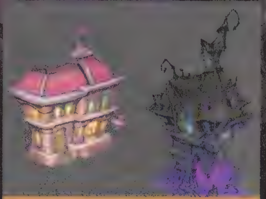
These spawn of the Phantom Blot come in many varieties, and they will harry Mickey at every turn. Pictured here are the spatters, the weakest of the many types. "They're the popcorn unit," Warren explains. "You need something that the player can just swat away. They're supposed to be funny, silly, and stupid."

BEETLEWORX

These creations of the Mad Doctor build and fix the world, but they won't put up with those who disrupt their maintenance. "In order to deal with these guys, you'll have to erase their painted bits to get to the vulnerable inert spots underneath," Spector reveals.



Many of the in-game environments are based on familiar Disney attractions. The team took hundreds of photos of rides and theme park sights as reference



The wasteland is filled with painted structures that can be filled in and erased with Mickey's paintbrush, and inert objects that can't be affected so easily. It won't be hard to identify which is which

hurriedly cleans up and flees back to his home, soon forgetting his transgression and proceeding on through years of fame and glory.

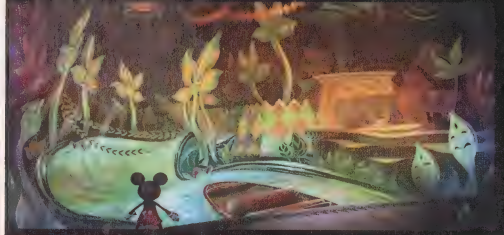
Meanwhile, Mickey's flippant moment of fun creates a terrible consequence – the spill turns Yensid's hidden world into a terrible wasteland controlled by a monstrous being called the Phantom Blot. Oswald and the other forgotten cartoons fight bravely to hold off the Blot, but it eventually overwhelms them, turning their once idyllic land into a twisted mockery of Yensid's original dream. Mickey Mouse remains oblivious to all of this, until one day the mirror through which he stepped comes alive and the Phantom Blot pulls him down into the world of forgotten, irrelevant cartoons. Thus, the adventure begins. Mickey Mouse must escape the Blot, find Oswald, earn his trust, and somehow defeat the corrupted menace so he can escape the Wasteland.

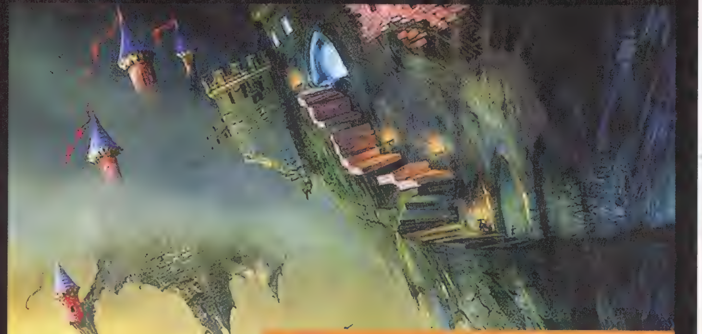
It's a clever metaphor around which to base a game, but it doesn't begin to tell the story of what Warren Spector and his team at Junction Point plan to bring to players in their Wii-exclusive title. The core gameplay mechanic is the ability to use paint and thinner to interact with the world, which is implemented through a paintbrush that Mickey drags into the Wasteland. Throughout play, the game world can be created and destroyed with the swipe of a brush (the Wii remote) across the screen. Empty swaths of air that glitter tantalizingly in space can be filled in to become buildings, platforms, and items. At the same time, bright and colorful walls and enemies can be swept away with a flick of paint thinner. Taken together, the two mechanics offer incredible flexibility, letting gamers play through levels in a different way every time, shaping the game geometry and environment as they progress.

"It's basically drawing and erasing; it's making the world whole, or making it go away," Spector explains. "I've been feeling really constrained by the fact that game designers – we build sets. We build things where if you scratch an inch below the surface, there's nothing there; if you peek behind the walls you see that they're flats held up with 2x4s. I wanted to create a world that was more than a movie set, where you could scratch beneath the surface and there was more going on there. This whole paint and thinner mechanic really plays into that because you can dynamically change the world to suit your needs. Dynamically changing the environment to solve problems is kind of what it's about."

The brush is the first of many game features that speaks to a credo plastered along the walls of Junction Point's Austin development house: "Playstyle Matters." It's a mission statement for the studio – that players should have a role in shaping the game they're playing. "I love telling stories, but what's really more important to

Continued on page 65 »

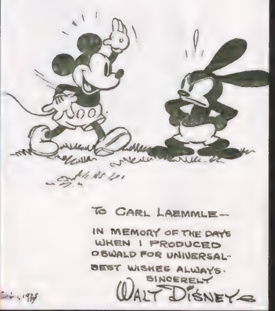




Warren Spector serves many roles on Epic Mickey, as the project's director as well as the founder and head of the development studio. Technically, his role moving forward is as vice president and creative director of Junction Point and Disney Interactive Studios

The Game In a Nutshell

This fascinating sketch, rarely seen outside of the Disney Archives, reveals a 1935 note from Walt Disney to the head of Universal Studios. It may be the only existing image from the period that shows Mickey and Oswald together.



TO CARL LAEMMLE–
IN MEMORY OF THE DAYS
WHEN I PRODUCED
OSWALD FOR UNIVERSAL-
BEST WISHES ALWAYS.
SINCERELY
WALT DISNEY

Two Sides to Every Story

We watched two playthroughs of Junction Point's early demo of the game, and witnessed how differently things can play out based on the player's choices. Another playthrough could easily reveal a mix of the two philosophies.

THE SCRAPPER

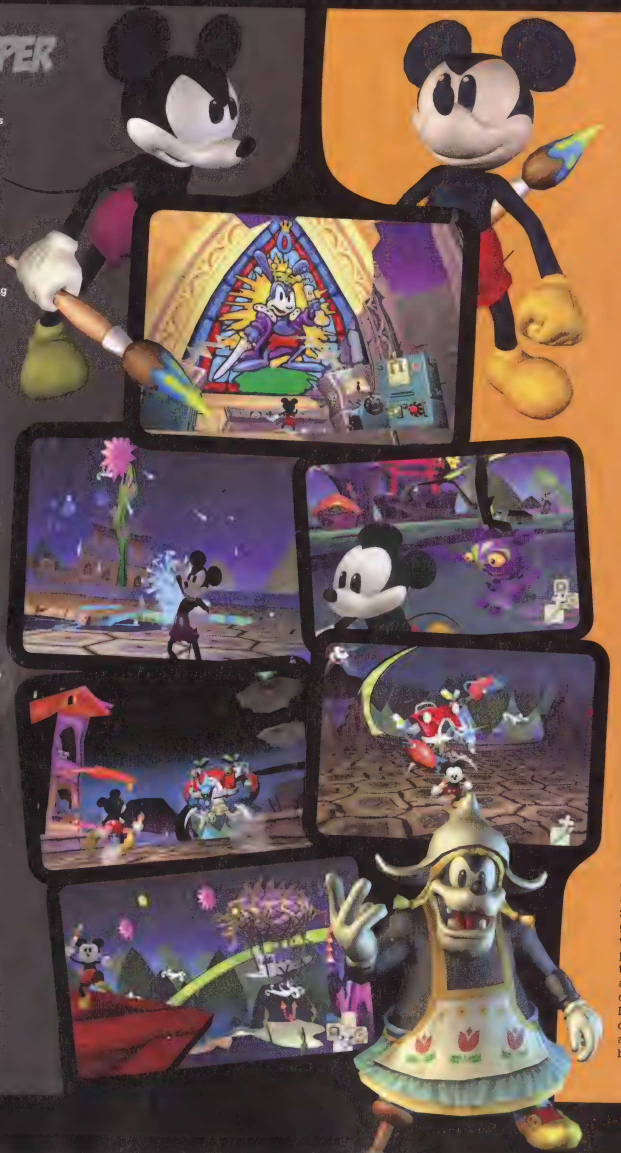
You are Mickey Mouse. You break free from the Mad Doctor's clutches and set out in pursuit of the mysterious rabbit, Oswald. A beautiful stained glass window gets in your way, so you erase it with a flip of your handy magic paintbrush and steal the treasure that lies in the alcove behind. This gremlin Gus may be helpful, so you free him from his cage, but you hardly have time to save all his little friends. They'll have to find their own way out of prison. You're too busy having a blast erasing everything in sight. With so few actual platforms left, it's a trick getting up to the exit out of the crazy scientist's lab, but with a wildly challenging leap, you make it.

Later, you find yourself in the heart of the Gremlin Village, a place strangely reminiscent of the "It's a Small World" attraction at Disneyland. You get right to work using paint thinner to erase the beautiful little painted houses that lie scattered about, destroying blotlings as you go. By now, you are looking decidedly ratlike, as you crouch low and wear a toothy grimace. Using a spatter as a living springboard, you leap to the exit amid cries of frustration from Gus that you've forgotten to save any more of his captured gremlins.

Erasing another unnecessary wall, you find a broken piece of Donald Duck's animatronic body. A gremlin collector appears, and offers to trade some added health for Donald's body part. A great deal!

Far beneath the Gremlin Village you find the mechanisms that keep the whole place running. Gus warns you not to mess with its gears of the tower that holds the whole thing together, but it looks like such flimsy construction that you decide to smash it. The tower collapses, creating a bridge with the destroyed pieces to the next area!

You spy Oswald, up to no good in a conversation with your old nemesis Pete. You smash a mechanical Beetleworx for the fun of it, then give chase. In the arena beyond, Pete attacks you from a huge floating zeppelin. You use some handy cannons lying around to shoot down the bloated ship, and celebrations are in order! Too bad no one is there to cheer. Donald's head gives you a scathing look, and hops away, bereft of a body. You turn to leave, only to see a terrifying clock tower rear up before you!



THE HERO

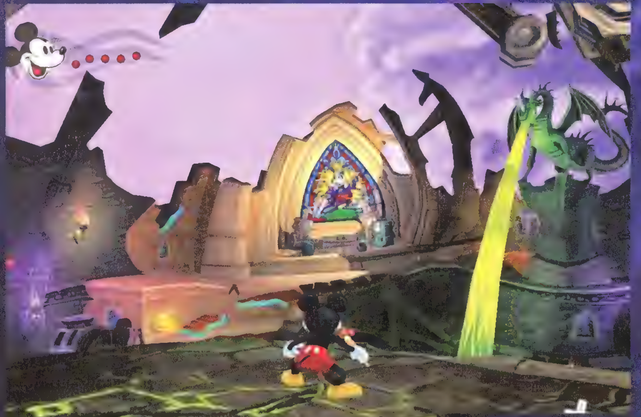
You are Mickey Mouse. You break free from the Mad Doctor's clutches, and set out in pursuit of the mysterious rabbit, Oswald. You save Gus the Gremlin, and proceed to do the same for Barry and Jamface, two other enslaved gremlins in nearby cages. It takes some work to free them, but one of them knows how to lower a platform that makes the crossing to the exit as easy as pie.

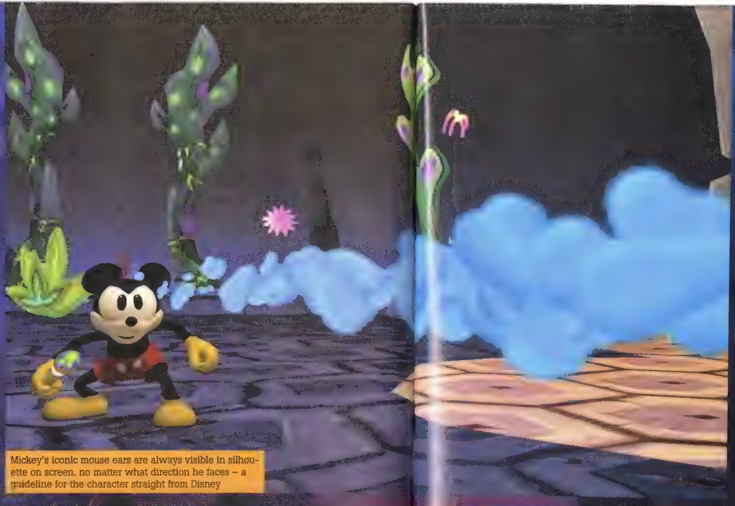
Later, you find yourself in the heart of the Gremlin Village, a place strangely reminiscent of the "It's a Small World" attraction at Disneyland. You start coloring in some of the absent houses with your handy magic paintbrush, and find helpful items inside. Painting in floating platforms helps you release some more captured gremlins, and some of them show their gratitude by revealing the locations of hidden treasure. You even track down some of the scattered body parts of your buddy, Donald Duck. By now, you are looking decidedly stalwart and brave, with bright eyes and golden hands. Some dangerous little spatters get in your way, but given your heroic appearance, a splash of paint turns them into your allies.

Some mischievous gremlin wants to buy Donald's body parts off of you, but who would do such a thing? You hold on to Donald's shattered pieces.

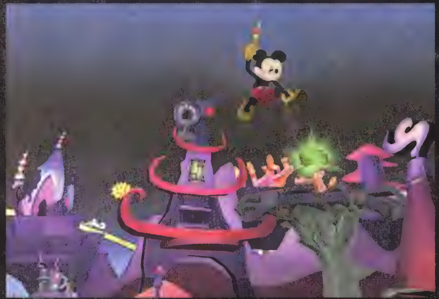
Far beneath the Gremlin Village you find the mechanism that keeps the whole place running. Bravely leaping between spinning platforms, you rescue a gremlin with the expertise to repair the nearby tower. Climbing to its peak, you launch yourself off to the next island using a newly rebuilt cannon.

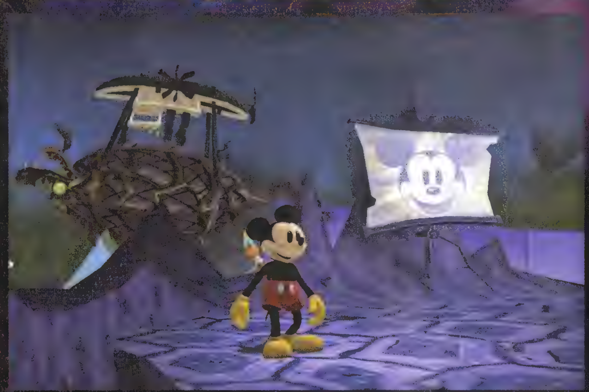
You spy Oswald, up to no good in a conversation with your old nemesis, Pete. Rushing past the unoffending Beetleworx, you give chase. In the arena beyond, Pete attacks you from a huge floating zeppelin. You rescue more forlorn gremlins hidden about the arena, who promptly fly up to Pete's zeppelin and tear it to pieces! Celebrations are in order, and you've got a host of new gremlin friends to cheer your success. A reassembled Donald waddles away a happy duck. You turn to leave, only to see a terrifying clock tower rear up before you!

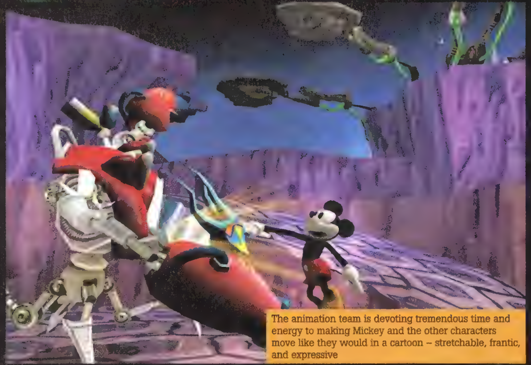




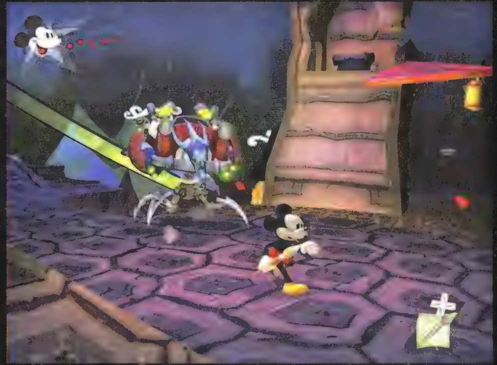
Mickey's iconic mouse ears are always visible in silhouette on screen, no matter what direction he faces – a guideline for the character straight from Disney

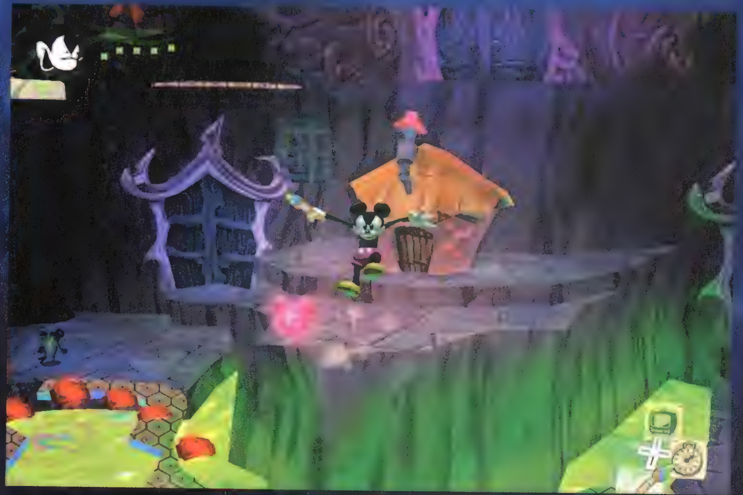






The animation team is devoting tremendous time and energy to making Mickey and the other characters move like they would in a cartoon – stretchable, frantic, and expressive





» Continued from page 62

me is collaborating with players in the telling of those stories," Spector says. "And of all the core gameplay values, the things that I think make games important, and make games different, are those values of creating problems that players can solve however they want, showing them the consequences of the choices they make."

That central tenet is also apparent in the broader game experience, which allows players to create the Mickey Mouse they imagine in their heads. Is he an ill-behaved rascal, or a selfless hero who sacrifices all for his friends? Epic Mickey includes a metasystem that monitors your activity in the game world and responds in kind. Erasing light and color, failing to help others, and wantonly destroying things for the fun of it moves Mickey ever closer to the Scrapper persona – a crouching, rat-like troublemaker who causes as much harm as good. Paint the world back to life, free those imprisoned by the Blot, and leave the world better than when you found it, and Mickey becomes a true Hero – standing tall as a paragon of vibrant color. Dip your brush in both pots, and Mickey remains a Wastelander – mischievous and carefree, but helpful under the right circumstances. Regardless of playstyle, the game responds with meaningful rewards, such as Hero Mickey's ability to befriend enemies to fight at his side.

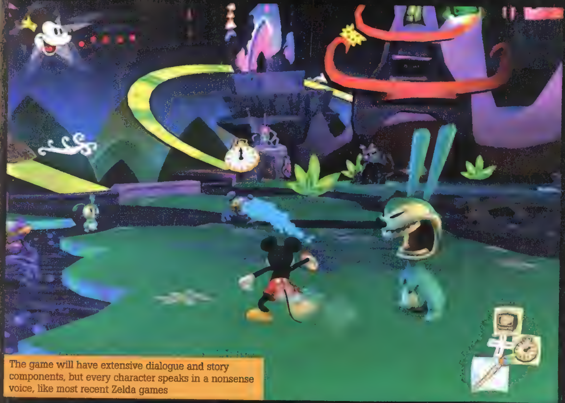
Whether playing as a Hero or Scrapper, players experience the warped landscapes of the Wasteland. It's a Disneyland gone horribly wrong through the dark machinations of the Phantom Blot, but still grounded in the humor and charm of Disney cartoons. "As people play the game and they look at things, and they move through spaces and they listen to the soundtrack – I want them to have this feeling of recognition and familiarity, and then I want to yank the rug out from under them." Spector says. "On top of that, I really want to scare kids. I want to go to Disneyland and see a 10 year old kid crying. 'Oh mommy, the clock tower's going to come to life and eat me!' That's my fondest dream. Disney scared the pants off me when I was a little kid. Disney needs to scare kids!"

That's not to say the world of the Wasteland is meant to be some bizarre playhouse of horror. The development team wants to ignite players' imaginations with bizarre and wondrous environments that speak to the best in old Disney cartoons. "It's also going to be a funny game," Spector tells us. "I want people to smile when they're playing a damned game for a change. This seems like a perfect opportunity to do that, but thrown in there every once in a while, there's going to be an 'Oh my god!' scare. That's what I'm shooting for."

To craft such a world, the artists at Junction Point feverishly created a Disneyland twisted and reshaped by the Phantom Blot. Dark Beauty's grim castle hangs over the world, foreboding and decadent – in its spires hides a mad doctor's lab. Separated islands float in the void, reminiscent of familiar Disney landmarks, but dramatically changed. In each location, colorful marshmallow cartoon buildings seem at war with sharp, inert walls and structures, often side by side. "We're kind of looking at this as the bastard love child of Tim Burton and Walt Disney," Spector says with a smile. "We want to put a twist on things to try to make it more appealing to a modern audience."

The game levels find Mickey exploring these many familiar yet unusual locations, combining the best traditions of platforming, world exploration, and role-playing into a unified whole. "The marketing guys always want to know what genre it is, and I love confounding those guys, so it's a bunch of genres mashed together," Spector relays to us. "What I want to do in this game is take the best of Mario, Zelda, Ratchet & Clank, and Deus Ex, and throw them all together into one package, and see what we come up with."

The main levels are sprawling 3D playgrounds filled with hidden objects, patrolling enemies,

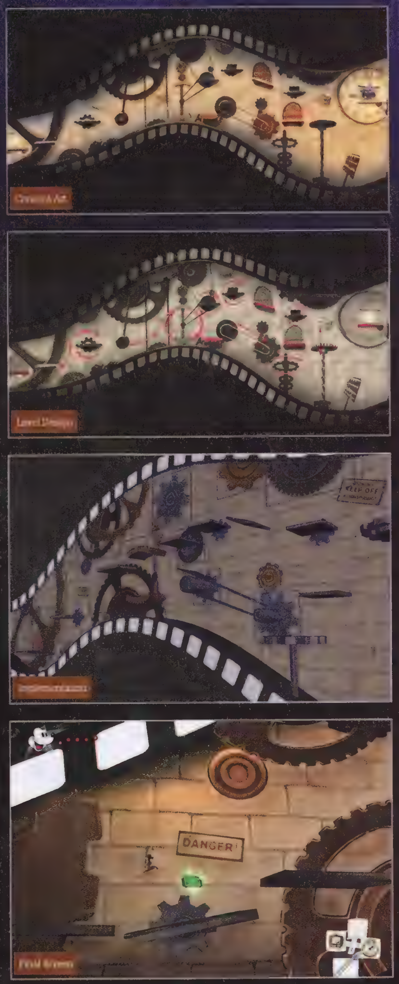


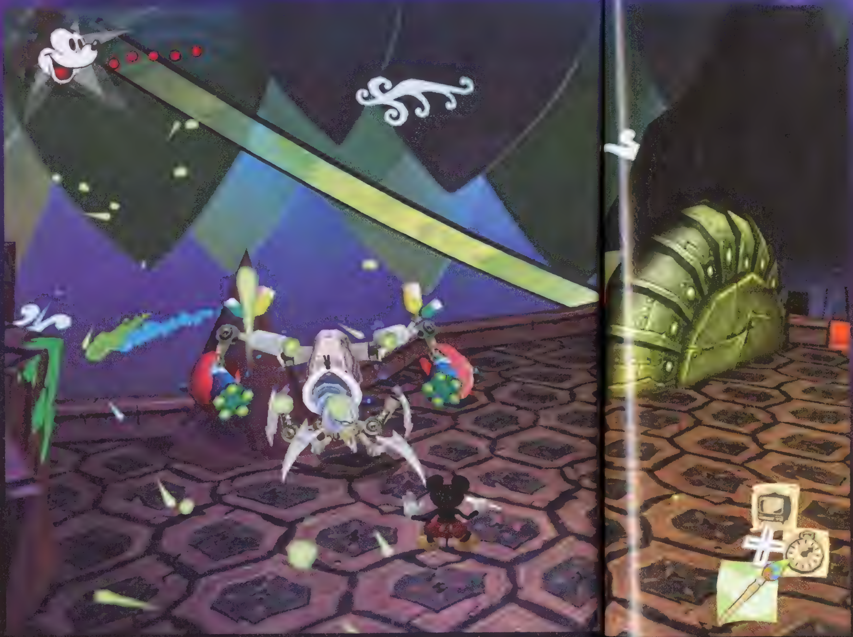
The game will have extensive dialogue and story components, but every character speaks in a nonsense voice, like most recent Zelda games

> "Disney scared the pants off me when I was a little kid. Disney needs to scare kids!"
>
> —Warren Spector

From Start to Finish

Check out this fascinating progression of level creation through one of Epic Mickey's short 2D side-scrolling levels, showing how early art concepts evolve into actual gameplay.





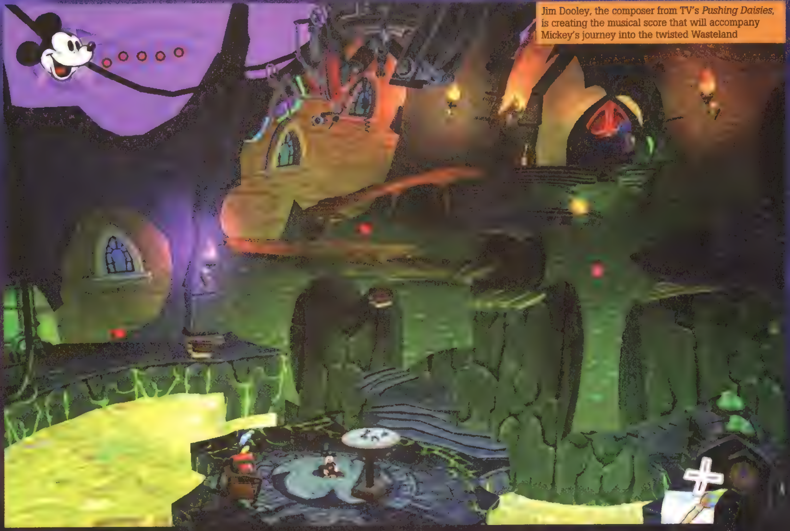
and moving platforms. In structure, each level begins with sights familiar to anyone that has ever made a visit to a Disney theme park. However, the deeper into a level one progresses, the more things grow off kilter. In some cases, Mickey even travels into behind-the-scenes areas – the gritty inner workings of an attraction. We saw one intriguing locale underneath "It's A Small World" where Mickey walks along the underside of the attraction amid its many whirring cogs and machines, all the while listening to a strange and disturbing version of the iconic theme music playing in reverse.

To pass between islands, Mickey encounters scattered movie projector screens that double as magical doorways. Dive through, and Mickey finds himself in a brief 2D platforming level, modeled after one of his decades-old cartoon shorts, which he must traverse to reach the next area. One we saw was filled with clocks and gears, just like the 1937 cartoon short *Clock Cleaners*. These brief connecting passages between areas act as a palate cleanser from the larger 3D levels, and a further chance for Junction Point to revel in the rich Mickey Mouse history.

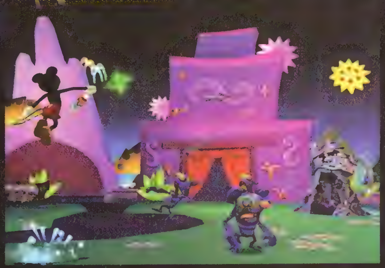
As Mickey leaps and runs through the Wasteland, he has more than paint and thinner to aid in his adventure. After finding a sketch, he can bring it to life with his magical paintbrush, altering the surrounding situation to his advantage. For instance, if Mickey finds a sketch of a clock, he can trigger it with a button press to slow time even as he stays at full speed, allowing him to jump past spinning fan blades or rush around a group of enemy blotlings. Another sketch creates a television; the device so fascinates his foes that they become entranced, allowing Mickey to pass unscathed. "Sketches modify the simulation," Spector tells us. "They offer a different kind of interaction with the world and the environment and the characters."

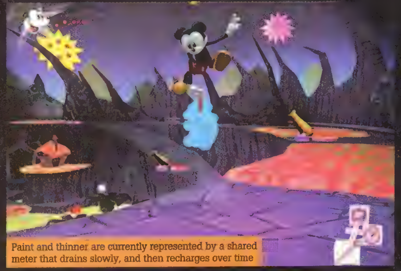
A simple collection mechanic also adds customization options. Just like a visit to Disneyland back in the day, the Wasteland is scattered with ride tickets, including the treasured "E-tickets" that used to give access to the best, newest attractions. In the Wasteland, these tickets are a form of currency that can be traded at vending machines or with certain characters for bonuses like added health, extra sketches, and other goodies. Combined with the fascinating cartoon metaphor, these little touches give Epic Mickey potential to emerge as a genuinely engaging and fun game.

It's a rare treat to have such a high-profile project headed to the Wii. All too often, Nintendo crafts that system's best releases. With a world-class developer afforded years of development time, a bold new direction, and a licensed character that has more cultural recognition than Link or Mario, Disney Epic Mickey has the chops to buck that trend. As Mickey begins his epic journey seeking redemption, Warren Spector hopes he and his team can do the same for the character in real life. "I want to see people going out there not just wearing a Mickey Mouse watch or t-shirt," Spector says. "I want people saying: 'I want to be Mickey Mouse.'" ◆

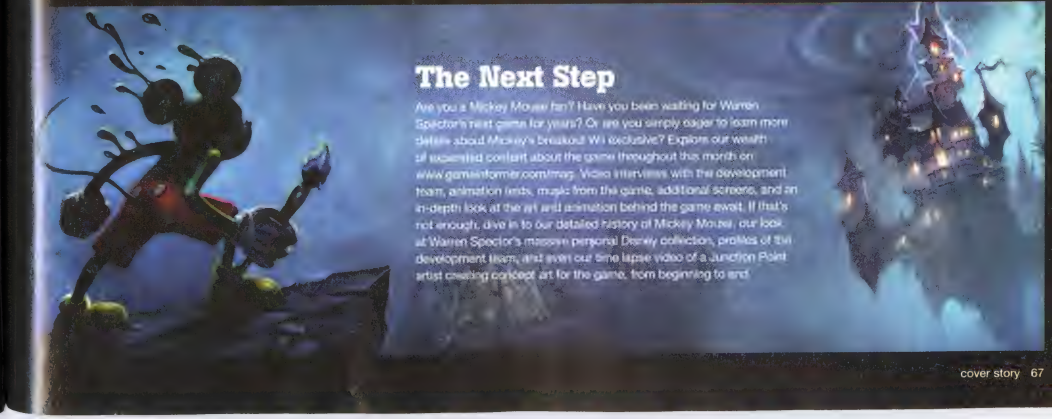


Jim Dooley, the composer from TV's *Pushing Daisies*, is creating the musical score that will accompany Mickey's journey into the twisted Wasteland





Paint and thinner are currently represented by a shared meter that drains slowly, and then recharges over time



The Next Step

Are you a Mickey Mouse fan? Have you been waiting for Warren Spector's next game for years? Or are you simply eager to learn more details about Mickey's breakout Wii exclusive? Explore our wealth of expanded content about the game throughout this month on www.gameinformer.com/mag. Video interviews with the development team, animation tests, music from the game, additional screens, and an in-depth look at the art and animation behind the game await. If that's not enough, dive in to our detailed history of Mickey Mouse, our look at Warren Spector's massive personal Disney collection, profiles of the development team, and even our time lapse video of a Junction Point artist creating concept art for the game, from beginning to end.

skate3

by Matthew Kato

Skating is not for loners; a gang mentality has always been part of the sport. We've all seen skaters congregating at the local spot, hanging out, taking turns trying to impress each other on a set of stairs, and showing off the latest tricks. There's an energy you feed off of when you're skating with others. It inspires you and pushes you to do better. The camaraderie is also born from the fact that learning tricks by yourself is hard. Want to learn how to do a heelflip? Find someone who knows how and have them show you. Chances are that after they do, you've just made a new friend. This social culture helps make the sport what it is. Electronic Arts and series developer Black Box are tapping into this sense of fellowship with Skate 3 – a game where no one skates alone.

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3 • Xbox 360

» **Style**
1-Player Action (6-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Electronic Arts

» **Developer**
Black Box

» **Release**
May

Flip Your Wig

Since the beginning of the franchise, fans have asked for underflips and darkslides. Now they are here.

The Underflip – An underflip is where you flip the board halfway around and then flip it back in mid-air. Don't worry – it's easier to perform in the game than it sounds. Simply flick the right analog stick up like a kickflip and then flick it back down quickly.

Darkslide – You flip the board like you're going to do a normal kickflip to boardslide, for instance, only you stop the board in mid-air and land on it with the trucks facing up. This is accomplished in the game by holding down the right bumper before you do your flip trick. Just don't forget to flip out again, otherwise you'll eat it as you come off the curb or rail.

Previous titles in the series offered varying degrees of competitive and co-op play, but Skate 3 takes hanging out with your skate buddies to a new level. Both the single-player and multiplayer portions of the game revolve around teams. Teams can help you complete online challenges against a rival squad, build your custom skate park, or even grow your skate company in the single-player career mode. Maybe you just want to skate around the city with friends, sessioning whatever comes your way. It's up to you.

The game's team concept is so pervasive that it blurs the distinction between online and offline. Your online friends can populate your offline single-player game as AI avatars with tendencies that mirror those they have online. If they're online while you're playing, they can actually come in and help you complete your single-player career challenges. "It's about being able to play together as much as possible throughout the entire game," says Skate 3 producer Brian Lindley.

An online Skate 3 team consists of a dozen people (although only a maximum of six can play with you at any one time). Teams hit the streets and compete against others in challenges old and new. One of the new challenges is called Domination. It's similar to Skate 2's Own the Spot, except two teams of skaters simultaneously try to claim as many skate spots as possible by setting the high score on designated rails, planters, etc. for their respective teams over an area. It's hectic, tense, and full of trash talk as you skate around trying to claim spots with your own high score or take back those that have been bested by the other team. Old challenge types return re-tooled for team play, and you can even create your own challenges.

Skaters have complete control over their teams. You can make custom graphics for all your boards, or make sure that everybody is sporting the tattoo you just made. You can build your own skate park and post the photo and video content team members created. Moreover, your gang's composition is entirely up to you, and it isn't necessarily about assembling the best shredders out there. You can form a team based entirely around people who like to create skate.reel videos or masochistic Hall of Meatheads who enjoy racking up road rash and high Hall of Meat scores.

Welcome to Skate School

Previous Skate games had tutorials, but Skate 3 is going a step beyond with Skate School, which includes better feedback for your tricks, advising you what you can do to improve. Skate 3 not only features Skate School and areas of Port Carverton that ascend in difficulty, but it also has multiple ways of completing a challenge, offering an easier way to own a challenge and a higher requisite score bar in order to kill it

Spreading your team's identity is a key component of the single-player game. Skate 3's story revolves around becoming a skate mogul by forming your own team and ruling the city. Taking down rival pro teams and selling your company's custom-made boards are a part of building your legend, and as you progress more and more of the city will be branded with your team graphics, like advertisements appearing on giant billboards. If you don't bring in any online friends to help you with your challenges, you can team up with an ever-growing roster of AI skaters who each have their own specialties. Picking out the right mix of five other AI teammates for a particular contest, for example, plays a role in your possible success.

Even before you transform the city and make it yours, Skate 3's world is not the good ol' San Vanelona from the previous games. A new city – Port Carverton – makes its debut. "I don't know if we could have re-invented San Vanelona for a third time and had another fictional disaster hit the city and reinvent how it looks," says producer Mike McCartney. Port Carverton has three distinct areas: the university, downtown, and the industrial port, and although each area gets progressively harder, all of them contain the full gamut of skate environments and are accessible right off the bat.

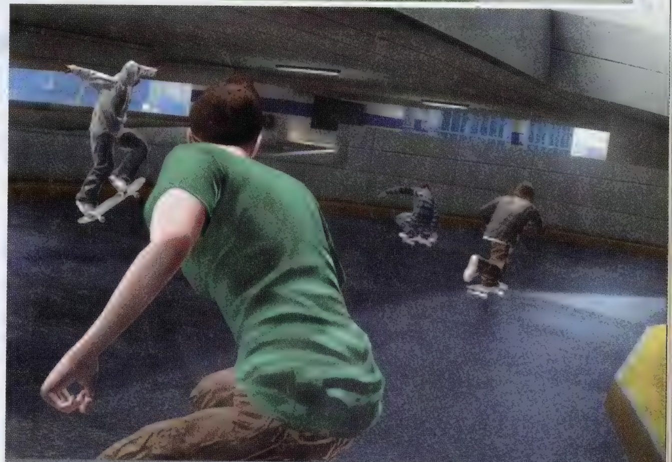
The Carver

Port Carverton is named after real-life skater Dan Hartley, known as The Carver. A longtime legend in the Vancouver skate scene, Hartley died of injuries sustained in a freak accident at a skate park earlier this year. He was a friend to the development team, and the city is a tribute to him.

I dropped into early versions of the university area and the industrial docks and immediately understood how the city's difficulty progression works. The university had more open spaces for approaching a rail, for example, while the abandoned ship hull down at the port had rusted holes in the transition areas that made skating it a little harder. However, it also had a bunch of cool transitions – including some that led into very hard-to-reach areas. McCartney says that in general the port has "more gnarly geometry and places to skate, but [it's] also the most rewarding, with the most extreme hills, the most extreme falls, the most extreme everything."

Port Carverton's downtown area has more pedestrian traffic than the others, and is naturally denser, however, the development team assured me that it is working to make pedestrians smarter and less obtrusive than in past Skate titles (and is tweaking the off-the-board player movement and camera control). The entire city, in fact, is more skater-friendly than San Vanelona ever was. "The game's not about busting you down and kicking your ass for skateboarding," McCartney says. Lindley adds, "The man's lifting you up, not putting you down." There are no skate stops on rails, and there is no security to chase you and try and knock you down. Port Carverton's university even has its own skate team – which you will no doubt go up against at some point.

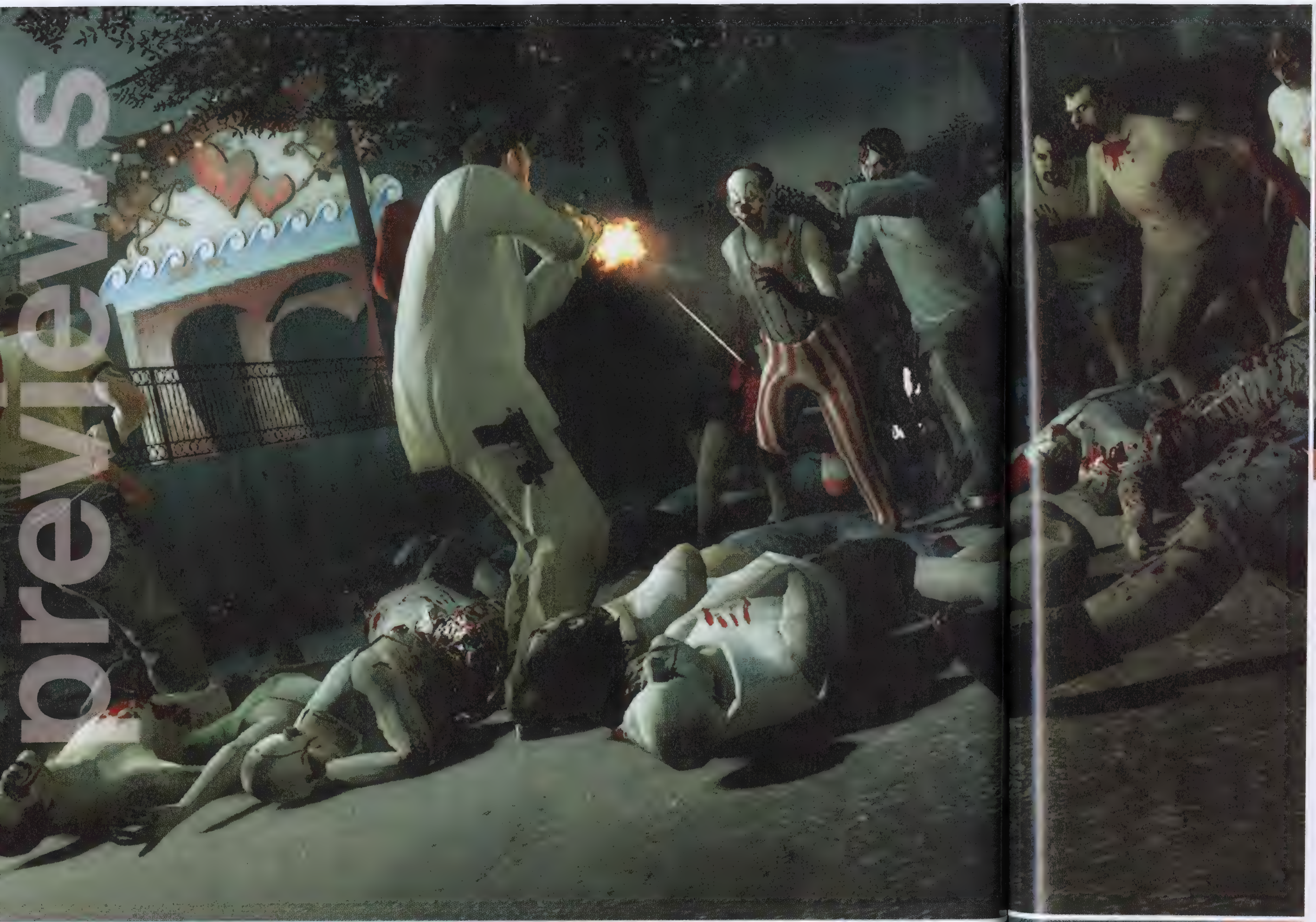
Certainly plenty of other surprises are packed into the city's streets — pools to carve, hills to bomb, and all the masonite and concrete you could possibly grind. So grab your board, get your friends together, and get ready to hit it. ◆

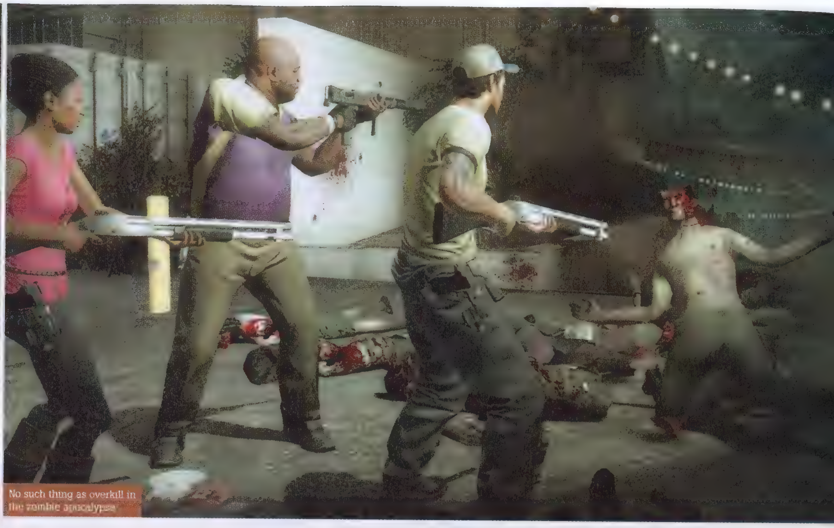


Skate 3 adds physical commands for races so you can try and push other skaters off their boards

If You Build It, They Will Come

Skate 3 blows out Skate 2's Create-A-Spot feature with the ability to create a whole skate park out of objects your team has won. There are different locations for you to house your creation in, as well as various sizes ranging from intimate to huge. You can even create your own challenges specifically for your park and share all of the content online. "The goal is for the player to be able to create the same kind of challenges that we create for them in career mode," explains producer Brian Lindley.





No such thing as overkill in the zombie apocalypse

Left 4 Dead 2

DECAYING DIXIELAND GETS NEW ZOMBIES, WEAPONS, AND SETTINGS

Surviving the zombie apocalypse is no simple task. Things don't get any easier as fate continues to throw putrid curve balls at you along the way, either – curve balls such as getting stuck in the bayou with mud zombies, or getting lost in a carnival with clown zombies. Valve doesn't care about your rattled nerves; they're willing to do anything to keep you at wit's end. Left 4 Dead 2 is packed with tons of new terrors that will keep even the most hardened suvivor's knuckles white with terror.

The most obvious new developments in the zombie outbreak are new campaigns. Swamp Fever sees a group of blood-soaked refugees trudging through the bogs of the deep south. As if slogging through waist-high slop isn't bad enough, a new "uncommon common" zombie has entered the horde in the form of the Mudman. These creepy crawlers scuttle across the mire's floor, concealed by the murky waters below. This makes them nearly impossible to see and difficult to hit. Expect plenty of surprise encounters and wasted shotgun shells at the expense of these swamp things.

The other new scenario is Dark Carnival, which centers on an infected fairgrounds in Whispering Oaks. The campaign starts with the survivors on an abandoned highway with dozens of empty cars strewn before them. As the foursome carries on, they travel through parks, a motel, and finally the macabre carnival itself. They step inside the brightly colored death trap to find a frightening yet fitting zombie, heralded by loud squeaks. The clown zombie is decked out in the whole whimsical garb, complete with noisy clown shoes. As the clown zombie continues to squeak, more common infected are attracted to the sound. This means you should aim quickly for that big red nose in the middle of all that white grease paint and pull the trigger, pronto.

Mud men and clown zombies? You must be thinking to yourself that things look pretty bleak. Don't worry, there are new melee weapons for you to channel your primal survival instincts through. An old standby, the baseball bat, makes its debut as a grabbable bludgeon; the weapon is excellent for sending meaty chunks of zombie cranium over the bleachers and out of the park. A hefty electric guitar also cranks up the gore-o-meter to 11. You'll relish the beautiful tone of this classic, crimson, Stratocaster-style guitar as you're caving in zombie skulls. You can also regulate on animated corpses Gordon Freeman-style with the flesh-rending crowbar. Each melee weapon shows off the amazing attention Valve pays to the gory details, with accurate dismemberment and decapitation.

Melee weapons are good for dispatching the common rabble, but you want to rely on heavy artillery for the new special infected. The Spitter, one of the new hero-type zombies, attacks with the sensibilities of a Boomer and a Smoker. These gangly ghouls specialize in projectile vomiting a huge puddle of acid, which damages any survivors within its area of effect. The Jockey also poses a new threat, looking like a carny version of Gollum. These pesky parasites pounce on you like a Hunter, latching onto your shoulders and taking over all motor functions. This lends them the perfect opportunity to guide an unwitting survivor away from their teammates, off a ledge, or into a pack of zombies.

You don't need to be flown out to Valve's Washington headquarters to see that this sequel is shaping up to be the quintessential zombie apocalypse game. Left 4 Dead 2 looks like a phenomenal game as it stands now, but there is much still stirring in the darkness. » **Tim Turi**

Not sure which melee weapons to pack for the undead uprising? Check out our feature on www.gameinformer.com/mag

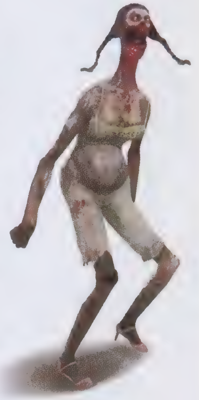
» **Platform**
Xbox 360 • PC

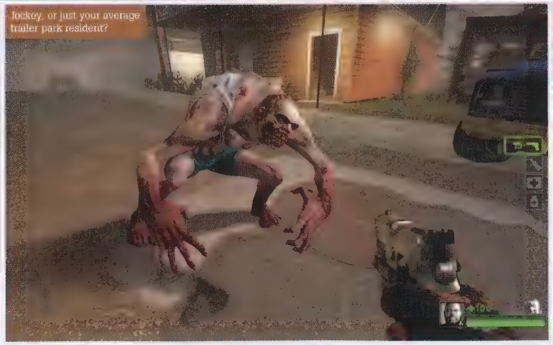
» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Shooter (8-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Electronic Arts

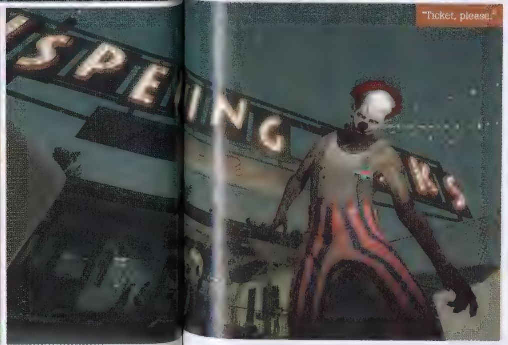
» **Developer**
Valve

» **Release**
November 17





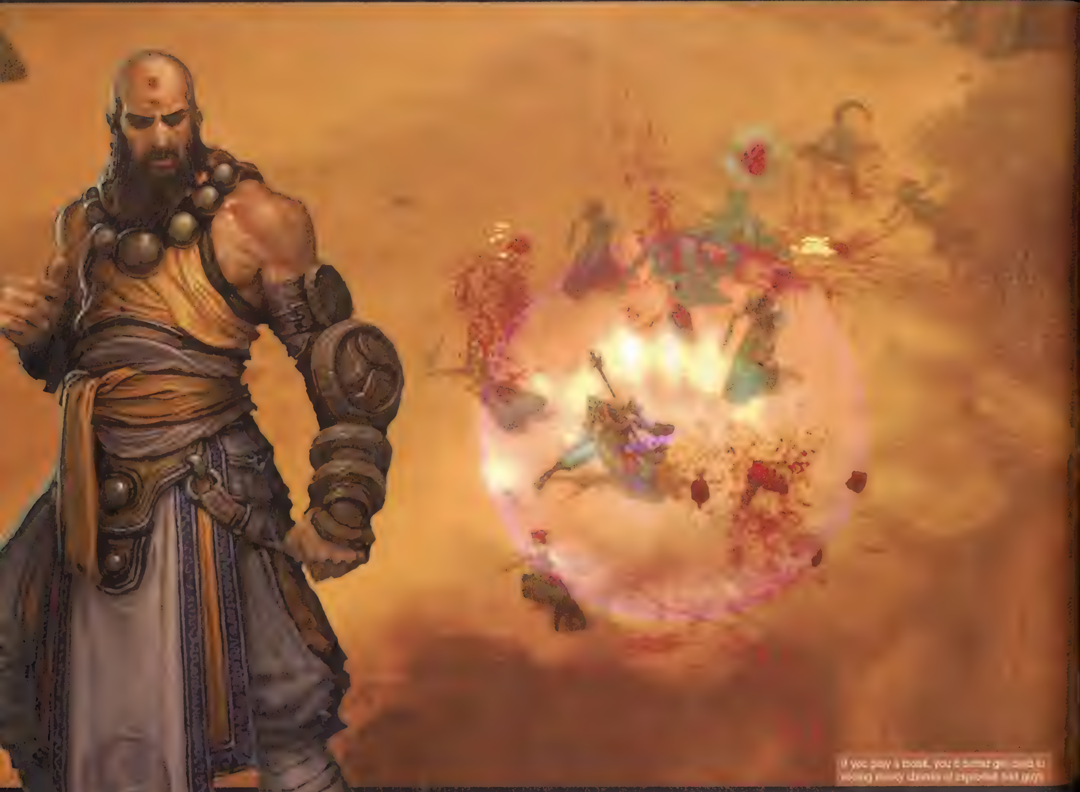
Jockey, or just your average trailer park resident?



"Ticket, please."

Diablo III

MEET THE LATEST ADDITION TO BLIZZARD'S DEMON-FIGHTING TEAM



If you play a monk, you'd better get used to seeing many chunks of exploded bad guys

» Platform
PC

» Style
1-Player Action/RPG
(Multiplayer TBA)

» Publisher
Activision

» Developer
Blizzard

» Release
TBA

It's easy to misunderstand the appeal of a game like Diablo III. To the uninformed observer, this hack n' slash champion consists of little more than holding down a mouse button as you mow through waves of enemies, stopping every once in a while to collect and equip mountains of loot. While that's not entirely off the mark, true Diablo fanatics recognize the subtle intricacies that have made the series such an addictive hit. Learning to play your class well and using all of the skills at your disposal is not unlike mastering a character in a fighting game.

That analogy may seem far-reaching, but it's about to get a whole lot more apt with the latest class announced for Diablo III: the monk. At Blizzcon 2009, Blizzard unveiled the new class, and the developers were explicit about how influential fighting games were on its design. Unlike the lumbering barbarian, the only other melee-focused class announced thus far, the monk will be a difficult class to master, presenting a challenge for skilled players looking to unlock the most powerful abilities.

Part of the monk's complexity comes from the combo system, a way of fighting that sets this character apart from the other classes. All of the monk's major melee attacks feature three steps. The most interesting example is the Exploding Palm skill. The first two steps are basic damage-dealing punches, but the third applies a damage-over-time status effect that increases if the enemy moves and, best of all, causes the baddie to explode if he/she/it dies while still under that effect, damaging nearby enemies and creating a gory visual treat.

Awesome, right? But doesn't it sound like the same old song and dance except with a single click granting three attacks instead of one? Thankfully, the combo system has more to it than that. Players can mix and match steps from different moves. If you begin with the first two steps of the Crippling Wave attack and then activate Exploding Palm, the monk will skip directly to applying the damage-over-time effect. Add in moves like Seven-Sided Strike, which allows the monk to teleport quickly between enemies, and Way of the Hundred Fists, which opens with a powerful dash attack, and tons of room is available for creating interesting and devastating combos.

On the Diablo III website, Blizzard describes the monk as "a fluid mass of restrained energy, meeting every attack with hardly a moment's distress." As this suggests, the monk's abilities won't be aggressive only. Moves like Impenetrable Defense allow him to shield himself from incoming attacks and even send enemy projectiles flying back at his opponents. In addition to using his fists and the staff he's pictured with, the monk can also equip a number of deadly claws and blades that wrap around his hands.

Blizzard has confirmed that the monk draws his great strength from holy magic, leaving the door open for more mystical powers. This helps explain the early gameplay videos of the monk in action, which include large groups of demonic monsters exploding into fountains of blood upon impact from the monk's fists. He may not have the brute strength of the barbarian class, but in the right hands, the monk will prove to be an extremely powerful fighter.

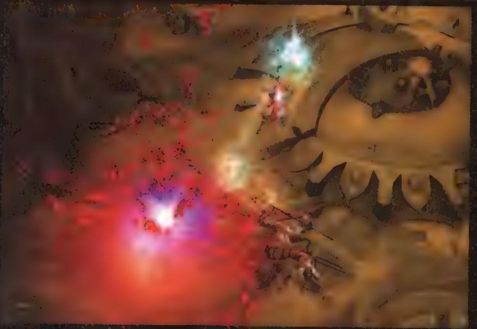
Blizzard also announced the Borderlands at Blizzcon, a desert wasteland that houses a secret demonic cult just begging to be blown to bits by the monk. In the monk's debut cinematic, an old man in the desert begs him to head to a nearby town that has been overrun by cultists. The old man leads the monk to the deserted city, where powerful cultists ambush him. After a dramatic, staff-swinging showdown, the monk leaves the city victorious and wanders back into the desert. He finds the old man, who is surprised to see that the monk is still alive. The monk forces the old man to revert to his true, demonic form, and then the two face off in an epic battle with fireworks worthy of Dragonball Z.

Can the simple hack n' slash gameplay of Diablo capture the fast-paced drama of a hand-to-hand kung fu battle? It's certainly new territory for the game, but if anyone can polish it enough to make sense within their world, it's Blizzard. » **Phil Kollar**

Check www.gameinformer.com/mag for our Blizzard interview detailing the monk's moves and what's happening with the other classes in Diablo III

Screaming, "You shall not pass!" won't keep these demons away

Battles are bigger and more chaotic than the first two Diablo games...which really just means more loot



Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2

INFINITY WARD UNVEILS MW2 MULTIPLAYER, AND OUR HANDS-ON IS ALL WE'D HOPED FOR

Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

Style
1-Player Shooter
(18-player online)

Publisher
Activision

Developer
Infinity Ward

Release
November 10

The Call of Duty creators at Infinity Ward are extremely talented artisans. They're in no danger of being confused with boundary-pushing studios like Double Fine or Quantic Dream. Like Blizzard, though, they hone their craft to perfection and execute a beloved formula at a level no other team has approached. Modern Warfare 2 is a perfect expression of the studio's identity.

Infinity Ward recently removed the wrappings from MW2's pined-for multiplayer. Rather than ginning up an involved PowerPoint presentation, the studio invited a few dozen journalists to jump in and shoot at each other for a few hours. The game speaks for itself. Modern Warfare 2 is a tightly tuned, beautifully rendered, darn near spotless first-person shooter that will disappoint very few of the franchise's legions of fans.

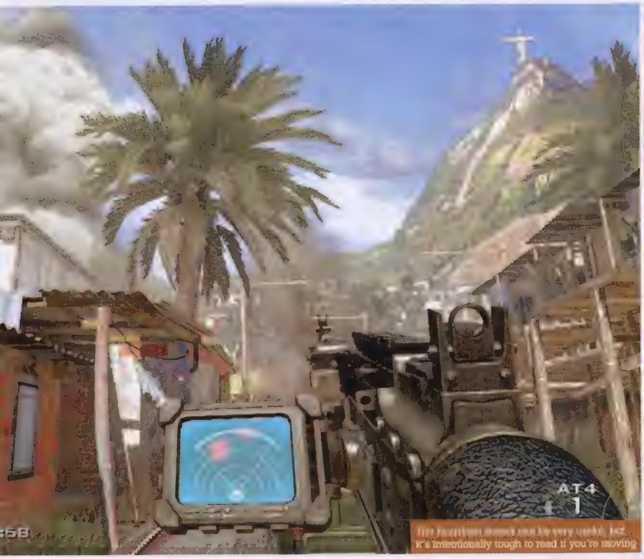
Barring anything being held back for the game's launch, there are few surprises to be found in MW2's online play. The action is fast and brutal. The presentation is unmatched. The three maps available for play showcased brilliant design, with carefully crafted sightlines, multiple routes to any destination, and a few hidden paths that lead to great sniping points. I've played variations on every gametype in MW2 before, but never in a setting that comes close to matching this overall experience.

The lauded create-a-class feature, which allows players to unlock and equip passive bonuses along with weapon loadouts, is hugely expanded. Completing challenges can unlock higher levels of certain perks now, rewarding excellence with increased power. None of these higher-order perks turn you into the Juggernaut by any means, and everything still has a counter, but giving experienced players straight-up better abilities is a worrisome path for Modern Warfare to explore.

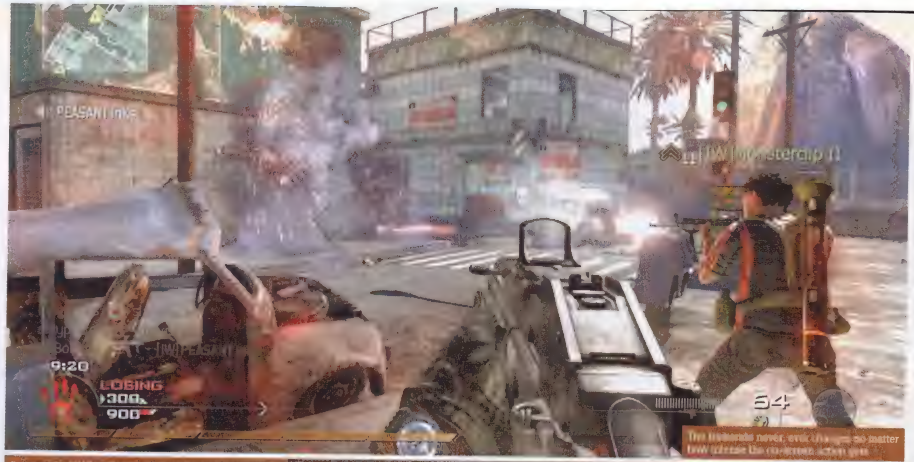
Kill streak rewards are customizable now as well. After unlocking them, you can change the default UAV/Predator Missile/etc. bonuses to others that suit your (or your clan's) style better. In addition, death streak perks complement kill streaks. These are aimed at leveling the playing field by preventing spawn camping and giving players a little boost after a bad run. The two I saw in action – dramatically increased health for a short period after spawning and copying your killer's class loadout – are less explosive than kill streak rewards, but can alter the outcome in more subtle ways.

Insignia and callsign rewards join your displayed rank as vanity rewards. Some of these are rewarded for tough challenges, while others are slowly unlocked as you accumulate experience points. Infinity Ward declined comment when asked whether prestige functionality (resetting your progress for a special icon) is returning in MW2.

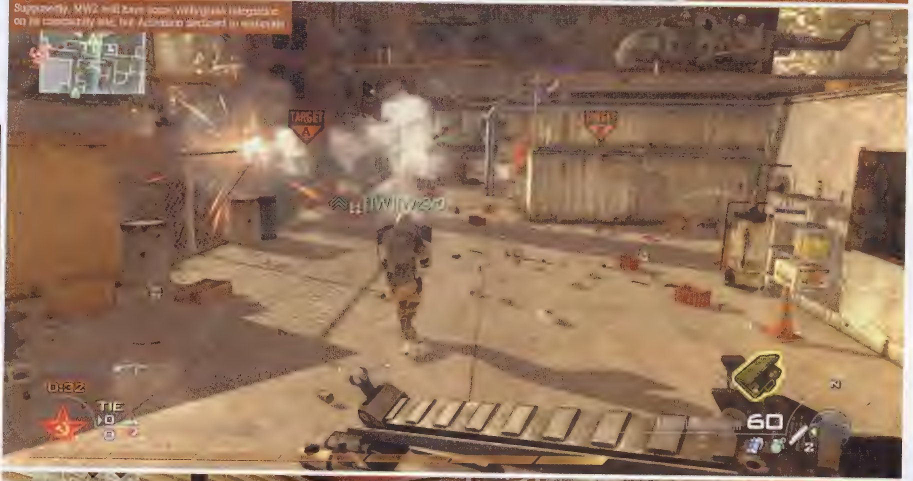
MW2 is very much a sequel, but it's an exquisitely crafted game that builds on a deep, solid foundation. The final release isn't far off now, and anything other than a resounding success on every level will be a shock. » **Adam Biessener**



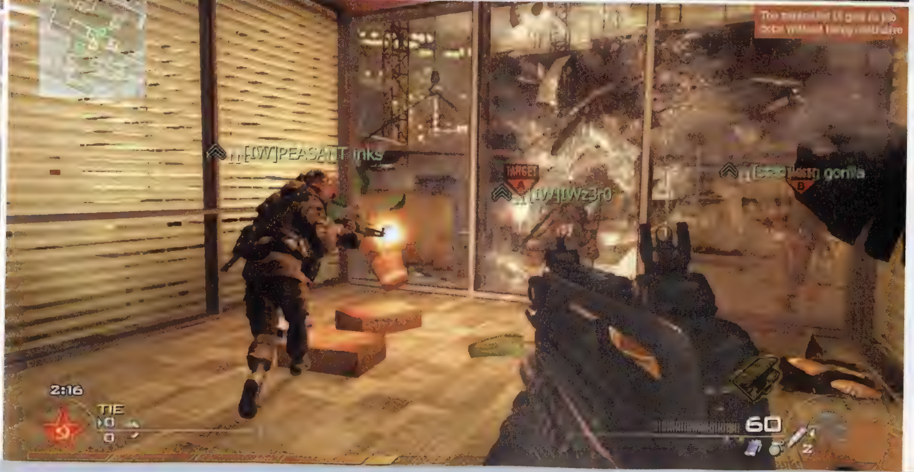
The [illegible] can be very useful, but it's intentionally tough to read if you're moving



The [illegible] never, ever [illegible] no matter how [illegible] the [illegible] action gets



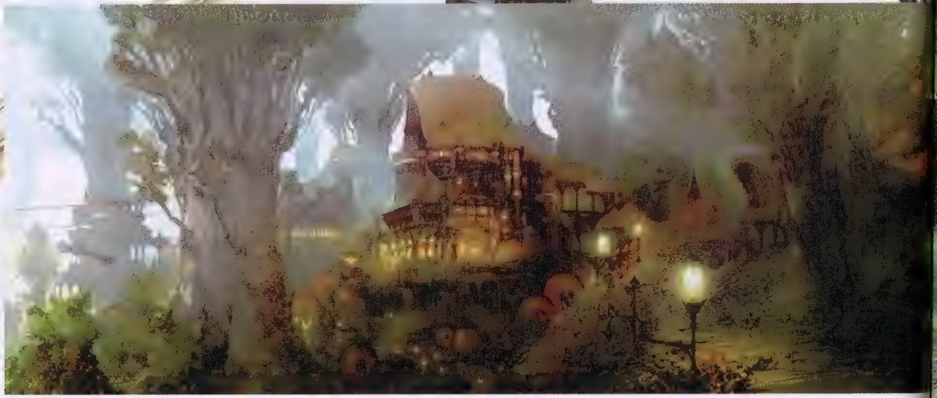
Supposedly, MW2 will have some [illegible] integration on its [illegible], but Activision declined to elaborate



The [illegible] UI gets the job done without being intrusive

Final Fantasy XIV

SQUARE'S MAGICAL WORLD OF EORZEA PROMISES LESS TIME-WASTING AND A NEW ARMOURY SYSTEM



» **Platform**
PlayStation 3 • PC

» **Style**
MMORPG

» **Publisher**
Square Enix

» **Developer**
Square Enix

» **Release**
2010

The biggest surprise of the understated E3 2008 was Microsoft convincing Square Enix to bring Final Fantasy XIII to the Xbox 360. Despite its increased size, E3 2009 only had a few comparable shockers, and one of them also involved a Final Fantasy game. The big news this time around? Final Fantasy XIV will launch in 2010 exclusively on the PS3 and PC.

Though we've heard whispers that an Xbox 360 version is still possible if Square Enix and Microsoft settle some issues, the trailer for Square's second MMO debuted at Sony's E3 press conference and revealed a sprawling new fantasy world called Eorzea. This brand new world consists of a single huge continent, Aldenard, and a sprinkling of smaller islands surrounding it. While this region seems to be the focus of the game, it's actually just one area in the greater world of Hydaelyn, meaning Square has left plenty of space for expansions.

Despite comprising a single continent, Aldenard contains several independent city-states. Ul'dah is the requisite desolate desert locale, but it's also rich in minerals, giving players and NPCs alike a reason to hang out there. Gridania and Ishgard are both important cities situated in impractical spots: deep in an ancient forest and at the top of treacherous mountains, respectively. Finally, there's Limsa Lominsa, an island nation that rules the seas but struggles with local pirate bands. Players can jump back and forth between these cities via the use of giant aetheryte crystals, although teleporting multiple times in a row is discouraged.

This grand fantasy universe Square Enix lovingly crafted is useless without a compelling gameplay system to back it up. While Final Fantasy XI was undeniably a success, pulling many long-time fans of the franchise into the MMO genre for the first time ever, a lot of gamers were intimidated by the difficult, group-focused questing experience and the sheer amount of time it took to level a single class, much less multiple classes.

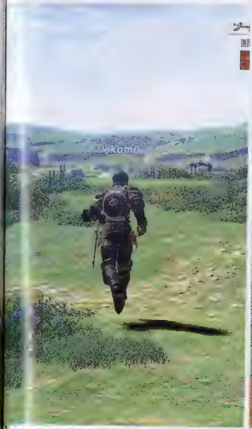
Square Enix innovates in FF XIV by introducing disciplines. Rather than choosing a class, you pursue to become a disciple of multiple disciplines. Disciples of War are combat experts, Disciples of Magic learn the dark arts, Disciples of Land excel at gathering materials from the land, and Disciples of Hand are master craftsmen. What path you take during a play session depends entirely on what gear you equip using the new Armoury System. Want to be a warrior? Grab a sword and shield. Magic more your thing? Put on some robes and grab a staff. Your equipped items also determine what skills are available to you at any one time, possibly making FF XIV the most gear-focused MMO yet.

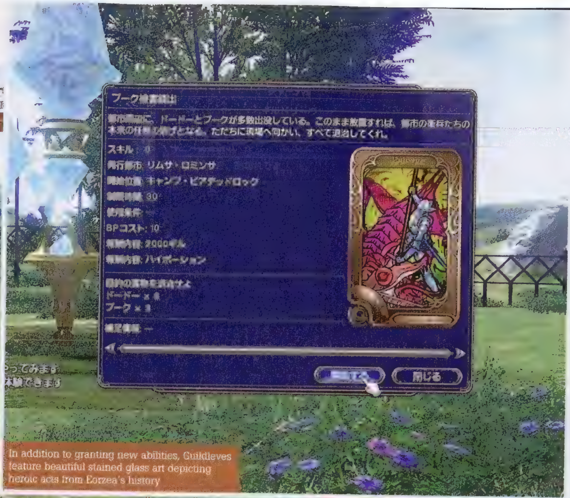
Within each discipline, multiple classes will skill up as you use gear associated with them. You can switch between mage, warrior, and blacksmith on a whim just by changing your equipment. Square Enix claims it is emphasizing "effective use of time" with FF XIV, which hopefully means less of FF XI's waiting around for a worthwhile group and the adoption of the Warcraft style, where you can accomplish something fun and worthwhile even if you only have a half-hour to play.

In a decision reminiscent of Final Fantasy XII, quests are issued by guilds – which also present players with guildleves, small plates that grant the carrier special abilities. With the right guildleve you can enter zones that are normally closed off, engage enemies in conversation, or perform a variety of otherwise impossible tasks. Basically, guildleves perform the dual task of making the player feel special and giving FF XIV the ability to craft interesting storytelling in an MMO.

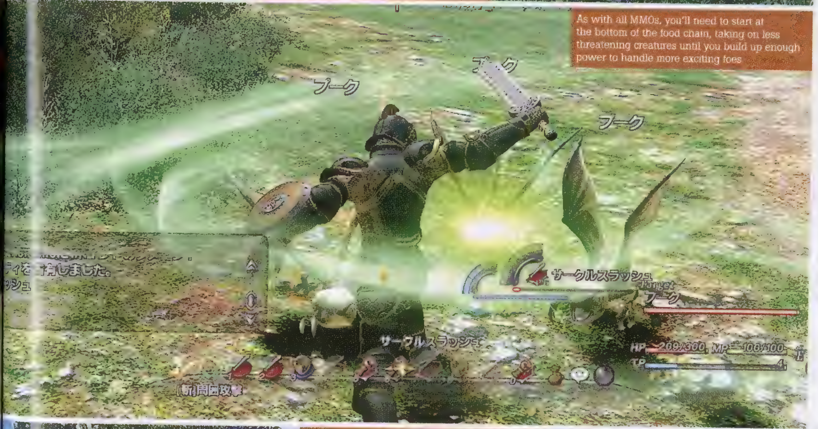
With Final Fantasy XIV, Square Enix seems determined to maintain FF XI's impressively massive online world and sense of exploration while expanding the potential audience through simpler and more varied gameplay. We haven't seen the game in action enough to know if the developer can deliver on this promise, but the franchise name alone should guarantee plenty of gamers eager to find out for themselves when the game launches next year. » **Phil Kollar**

See our list of the top five ways Final Fantasy XIV could make us cancel our World of Warcraft subscriptions at www.gameinformer.com/mag

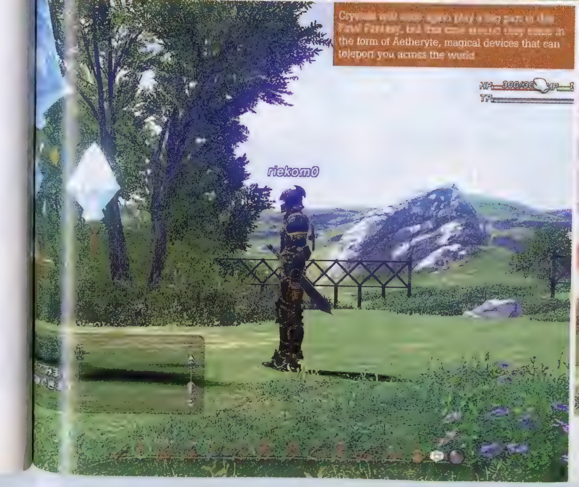




In addition to granting new abilities, Guildleves feature beautiful stained glass art depicting heroic acts from Eorzea's history



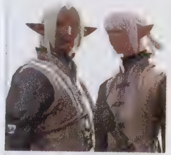
As with all MMOs, you'll need to start at the bottom of the food chain, taking on less threatening creatures until you build up enough power to handle more exciting foes



Crystals will once again play a big part in the Final Fantasy, but this time around they come in the form of Aetheryte, magical devices that can teleport you across the world

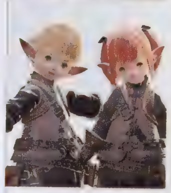
Final Fantasy XI's Races Reimagined

Final Fantasy XI had five playable races. Although it takes place in a new world, XIV has the same number and similar types.



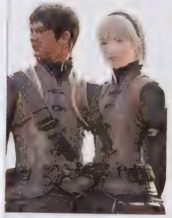
Elezen

This tall, slender race takes the place of FF XI's Elvaan as the world's elf-type characters. They even have dark elf counterparts.



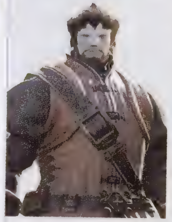
Lalafell

Taking the Tarutaru's spot as the tiny, cute Hobbit-like race in FF XIV, the Lalafell has greater agility, suggesting better combat capabilities than in FF XI.



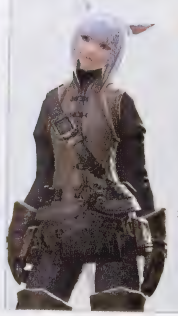
Hyur

Known as the Hume last time around, the Hyur are basically humans. As such, they're also the most populous race and considered the main force pushing Eorzea's culture forward.



Roegadyn

As with FF XI's Galka, the giant Roegadyn race is all-male, though this time they're also a largely sea-faring race. As such, expect them to spend a lot of time in the pirate capital of Limsa Lominsa

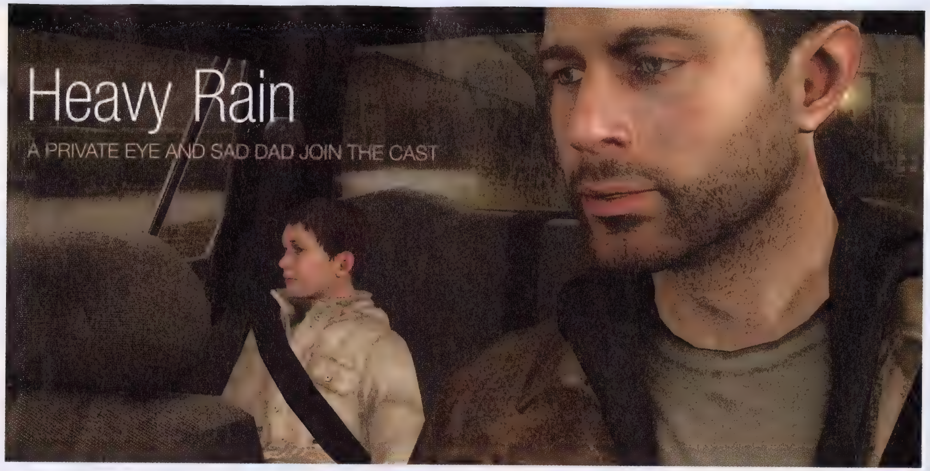


Miquo'te

And on the all-female side, we have the Miquo'te, a race of girls with cat ears similar to FF XI's Mithra. These ladies are split into two groups, one that is awake during the day and one that is nocturnal.

Heavy Rain

A PRIVATE EYE AND SAD DAD JOIN THE CAST



» Platform
PlayStation 3

» Style
1-Player Adventure

» Publisher
Sony Computer Entertainment

» Developer
Quantic Dream

» Release
Early 2010

Over the last several months we've met half of Heavy Rain's intriguing cast. FBI profiler Norman Jayden fought with junkyard proprietor Mad Jack, and Madison Paige performed a striptease for a dangerous nightclub owner. This time around we meet both remaining characters in one fell swoop.

Scott Shelby

In the scene we saw, this grizzled private detective is visiting a convenience store to ask the owner, Hassan, a few questions. Scott explains to the man that he's investigating the origami killer on behalf of some of the affected families. Hassan is still too hurt and angry about the murder of his own child to discuss it. Scott apologizes and decides to pick up an inhaler while he's there. As he walks to the back of the store, a robber barges in and sticks up the place. Scott could just hide and let Hassan get murdered, but he decides to get involved. He walks silently up an aisle, delicately grabbing a glass bottle with the analog stick. He bumps into a stack of detergent boxes and must catch one that falls using onscreen prompts and carefully place it back onto the shelf again with the analog stick. Just when the argument between the two men gets to the breaking point, Scott bashes the robber in the back of the head via swinging the DualShock controller in the same downward motion. Hassan is grateful for the help and decides to help the P.I. He produces a small box containing an origami salamander that was sent to him while his son was missing.

Next Quantic Dream restarts the scenario and we see an alternate resolution. This time Scott goes up the middle aisle and carefully steps over some potato chips that are spilled on the floor. The button pressing sequence is performed incorrectly, resulting in a loud crunch. The robber turns around and points his gun at Scott. The P.I., hands raised, tries to talk the culprit into just turning around and leaving, and it almost seems like it is going to work. Instead, the robber gets spooked. Scott lunges at him and knocks him out with a haymaker. It's a similar happy outcome arrived at in a totally different way, but even if bad things happen the story continues. Hassan can be shot and killed and you'd never get the origami box. Scott can be shot and seriously wounded in the scuffle, and it will affect him going forward.

Ethan Mars

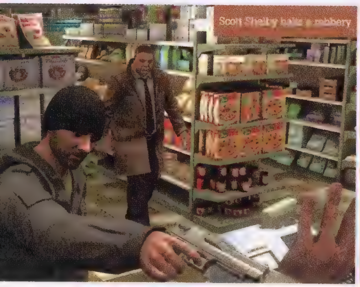
This poor fella is in a rough patch when the game kicks off. One of his sons was hit by a car and killed when he walked off while the family was at a park, and in the wake of this Ethan and his wife got a divorce. In the segment we see, Ethan is picking up his other son, Shaun, from school on a gray, rainy day. Their relationship has clearly become distant over the last year or so, and players can further this by being gruff or try to heal the divide somewhat with strained friendly conversation.

When they return to the house, Shaun flips on the TV and crashes on the couch. A to-do list on the wall indicates a timetable of Ethan's fatherly responsibilities: fix a snack, help with homework, make dinner, put to bed. While the demo shows Ethan completing these tasks, players can ignore Shaun altogether and he'll basically take care of himself.

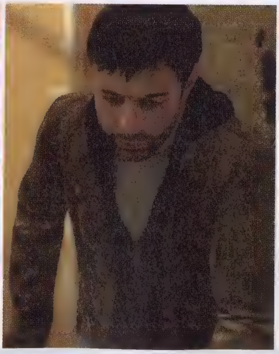
Ethan gives Shaun some chips from the kitchen cupboard and proceeds to wander around the house. He goes to the bathroom to wash his hands, drinks some orange juice out of the fridge, and shoots some baskets in the backyard. Next he wanders into Shaun's room and finds a crayon drawing of the car accident. A tinge of pain comes across his face. He goes downstairs and convinces Shaun to do his homework after a little griping. Ethan selects pizza out of several options in the fridge and pops it in the microwave. He has some initial trouble breaking the ice with Shaun, but eventually wins him over with a little fruit juggling.

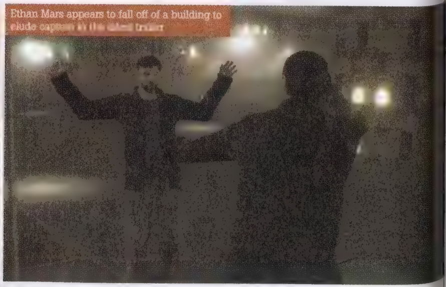
It's getting dark so Ethan flips on the light and convinces Shaun it's time to go to bed. Just as he's about to be tucked in, Shaun asks why his dad looks so sad. Before Ethan can answer, Shaun comforts him saying, "What happened to Jason wasn't your fault." Again, this is a relatively happy ending to the scene. It can also wrap up with Ethan carrying Shaun upstairs to bed after he falls asleep on the couch, or Shaun may even tell his dad he hates him and slam the door in his face. Either way, the scene sets up what kind of relationship you choose for Ethan to have with his son just before he's kidnapped by the origami killer. » **Bryan Vore**

View the trailer featuring the two new Heavy Rain characters at www.gameinformer.com/mag



Scott Shelby halts a robbery





Ethan Mars appears to fall off of a building to elude capture in the latest trailer

IF YOU'RE A MAN,
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IF YOU'RE NOT A MAN,
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Bayonetta

PLATINUM GAMES REDEFINES "OVER THE TOP"

Many [illegible] Devil May Cry seem modest by comparison

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360
» **Style**
1-Player Action
» **Publisher**
Sega
» **Developer**
Platinum Games
» **Release**
January

For the last several years, fans of absurd, over-the-top 3D action games got their fix through franchises like God of War, Ninja Gaiden, and Devil May Cry. All three of these popular series have their own eccentricities and ludicrous attacks, but none can hold a candle to the insanity that is Bayonetta.

Watch any gameplay or cinematic video and you'll see everything from horses exploding into birds to a giant high-heeled boot made out of the titular character's hair. Director Hideki Kamiya (Resident Evil, Viewtiful Joe, Devil May Cry) has never shied away from hardcore action, and this new title trumps all of his previous works when it comes to onscreen chaos.

By now, you've probably heard that Bayonetta's suit is actually made out of her own hair and can be used for summon-style attacks. She also has access to melee weapons, an arsenal of guns, butterfly wings that enable you to double jump, and a variety of violent "torture attacks." One allows her to make iron maidens appear out of nowhere, into which she can kick enemies. Another has her bending an opponent over and kicking him in the ass over and over with a button press (think God of War II's head-slamming scene), followed by throwing him into a guillotine that slices his head clean off. Moments like these are not sparse, as the developers are pushing for non-stop action (their exact phrasing is "infinity climax action"). According to Platinum Games, the giant boss fights will be climaxes on top of the constant "climax." That's saying something when the standard moves are as "conservative" as placing a pole into the ground and swinging around stripper-style while kicking angels in the face.

Considering the sheer amount of weapons and attacks at Bayonetta's disposal, it's no surprise to learn that the game also features a currency system and weapons dealer. Defeated enemies will reward you with angel halos that look suspiciously like Sonic's rings, which can be used to purchase new moves, items, and weapons at the Gates of Hell. Bayonetta can also sell or use weapons from her fallen enemies, although they have a limited number of uses if utilized in combat.

All of this will likely resonate well with hardcore action gamers, but there's one aspect of Bayonetta that has predictably angered gaming message board communities – it includes a "very easy" mode that's playable with only one hand. This mode is for casual gamers who don't have the time or skill to learn an assortment of button combinations and attack commands (although all difficulties will allow you to practice combos during loading sequences). In the very easy mode, on-screen prompts appear when certain moves like torture attacks become available, and your hand never has to stray from the face buttons to pull them off. Many hardcore gamers are crying foul over this decision, but it's a moot point as they never have to touch the mode if they choose.

We've played through the first four chapters, and the storyline makes Ninja Gaiden's convoluted plot seem like an episode of *Leave it to Beaver*. As soon as you assume control of the game, you're fighting dozens of angels on what appears to be the clock tower of Big Ben as it flies through some kind of inter-dimensional vortex. Not long afterwards, your amnesiac witch is slaying airborne statue heads in a graveyard and torturing angels on the wing of an airplane. Successfully pass these levels and you're rewarded with a shooting gallery minigame in which you shoot angels to earn money used to buy lollipops. It really is the nonstop action that the developers are hyping, from the frequent boss battles to the arsenal of moves at your disposal. I doubt gamers will be complaining about the mayhem, as anyone who picks up this game shouldn't be expecting anything modest or remotely sane. » **Dan Ryckert**

Check out Sega's over-the-top Tokyo Game Show trailer of Bayonetta at www.gameinformer.com/mag

Expect to slaughter angels in various [illegible]

Lost Planet 2

FOR ITS SHOOTER SEQUEL, CAPCOM GOES BIG

The bigger the enemy, the bigger the obvious orange weak spot

When we first saw Lost Planet 2 earlier this year, Capcom treated us to a particularly impressive sight – a towering, glistening salamander boss stomping around a gorgeous cove. Showing off the game's new co-op mode, four soldiers blasted it with rockets, machine guns, and VS suits in a coordinated display of firepower. Eventually, one lucky (?) soldier took the battle directly into the weakened creature, finishing it off while knee-deep in its innards. As it disintegrated into skeletal remains, producer Jun Takeuchi boasted that we had just seen one of the game's smaller boss encounters. Sure.

Months later, Takeuchi makes good on his promise, showing footage of a worm-like creature so massive it could have eaten dozens of those salamanders without chewing. As players battle on a speeding train, the monster trails closely behind, swallowing anything unfortunate to get close to its terrifying maw. We don't see how the battle resolved itself, but we suspect those shipping containers of T-ENG aren't just there for the ride. Not only does this scene illustrate the game's increasingly large menagerie, but it also highlights another of planet E.D.N. III's environments – an arid desert with wind-whipped clouds of coarse sand. With the lush rainforest areas we previously saw, we already know that Lost Planet 2 won't be the geographical one-trick pony of its predecessor.

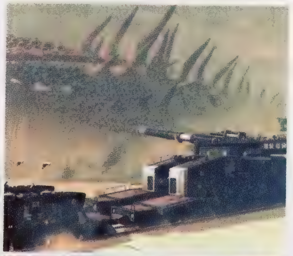
The narrative also breaks away from the first game. Rather than follow the action through the eyes of a single character, players experience the story from the viewpoint of different characters and factions in a more chapter-oriented structure. Korean star Byung Hun Lee doesn't return as Wayne Holden either, though Takeuchi jokes that we might see a cameo of his shoes.

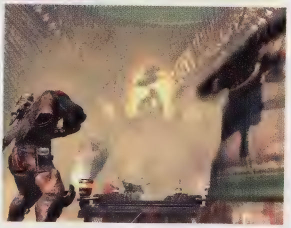
The story can be experienced alone or through the co-op mode. Players can join up with three friends, filling empty slots with AI bots if necessary, or leaving them empty for an extra Akrid-slaying challenge. Teamwork is encouraged, but squads are also ranked individually depending upon their performance. If they play well enough, soldiers can earn special items, outfits, and other customizable gear.

Ultimately, the only thing better than blasting dozens of Akrid scum into a fine green mist is doing it without freezing your tail off. The faster action, more diverse areas, and even larger enemies are all pieces of what we're hoping will become another fantastic action game. » **Jeff Cork**

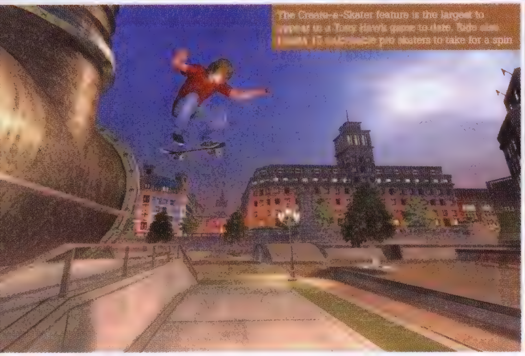
» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC
» **Style**
1 to 4-Player Shooter
(4-Player Online)
» **Publisher**
Capcom
» **Developer**
Capcom
» **Release**
2010

All aboard the pew-pew train!





...is that Kurt Cobain on the skateboard? Activision must be stopped.



The Create-a-Skater feature is the largest to appear in a Tony Hawk game to date. Ride also boasts 15 unlockable pro skaters to take for a spin

Party Mode aims to make Ride a bit more social, allowing up to eight players (four online) to face skate or pass the board in a series of quick challenges

Tony Hawk: Ride

ACTIVISION WALKS THE LINE, HOPING TO APPEAL TO NOVICES AND SEASONED SKATERS ALIKE

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • Wii

» **Style**
1 to 8-Player Sports
(4-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Activision

» **Developer**
Robomodo (PS3, 360),
Buzz Monkey (Wii)

» **Release**
November 17

Adorned with a trendy wing motif, Tony Hawk: Ride's final board design is indicative of Activision's approach to the title as a whole. Forfeiting combos and control for accessibility and the promise of mass-market appeal, Ride straddles the line between hardcore and casual, risking everything in an attempt to secure both sides of the market.

Ride boasts three difficulty settings, the lowest of which is forgiving even to those who struggle with basic coordination. In this casual mode, the player skates on rails, and can jump and perform tricks without fear of an epic crash. Confident mode gives you free range of motion, but environmental obstacles slightly repel you and make it easier to stay on your feet. The toughest difficulty, hardcore, relies entirely on skill to keep you from faceplanting.

We start our "hands-on" session testing a simple speed run. This mode challenges us to blow through green orbs and avoid red ones, using both lateral and vertical movement in a race against the clock. Green orbs boost the time remaining and red orbs deflate the number. Performing tricks augments the final score. Our demo is notably set on the casual difficulty, perhaps to avoid scaring off players intimidated by the thought of skateboarding for the first time. Despite the easy setting, we find it difficult to perform any deliberate movements. Basic moves such as the ollie or nollie require a degree of control, as wildly popping the board in the air does not always result in the move we expect. This is especially true if your hands are flailing over the IR sensors to keep balanced. Sure, we pull off some cool moves, but without the proper time to get acclimated, most are unintentional. After a couple of runs through the speed session, we have the basic vocabulary of tricks down and cruise through the level with some degree of accuracy.

Next we move onto the Quiksilver '80s Vert Challenge, which has us vying for points by performing flips and grabs for a set amount of time. Here our range of motion is much freer. To maximize scoring we must use the IR sensors and accelerometers in tandem – easier said than done. Timing plays a much larger role in pulling off specific moves, requiring weight shifts at just the right second. Like the speed run, after two or three goes we have the basics down, but thanks to a short delay in movements registering with the IR sensors, the more impressive moves feel accidental.

Our impressions leave us feeling that Ride may be stuck in skateboard purgatory. Novices may find little things like the simple act of staying balanced hard to grasp. At the same time, seasoned skateboarders may struggle to find variety in the moveset that two accelerometers and several IR sensors can provide. Will forfeiting combos and control in exchange for novelty result in an experience rewarding enough to put Tony Hawk on par with EA's Skate? To be fair, our demo only lasted the better part of 15 minutes. As with any game boasting a unique peripheral, a learning curve is to be expected. Still, we have to wonder if Tony Hawk: Ride can satisfy both camps it's trying to reach. The $119 price might not help Activision achieve that goal. » **Meagan VanBurkleo**

How can giant blue people hide from anyone?

Avatar

JAMES CAMERON'S FILM ADAPTATION BRINGS 3D HOME

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • Wii • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Shooter
(Multiplayer TBA)

» **Publisher**
Ubisoft

» **Developer**
Ubisoft Montreal

» **Release**
November 24

For those unfamiliar with the concept behind James Cameron's upcoming film, it takes place on an alien world called Pandora. As the human RDA Corporation scours the planet for resources, conflict erupts with the indigenous animals and 10-foot-tall blue humanoid creatures called Na'vi. In the game you start off as an RDA soldier blowing away everything that moves, but eventually trade off roles as a melee focused Na'vi.

In our hands-on time with the game, we saw its stereoscopic 3D capabilities in action on 360 with the help of polarized glasses and a 3D-capable TV. Those familiar with PC 3D systems from iZ3D and Nvidia know what to expect from the visuals; jungle foliage pops toward us as we navigate an RDA chopper to a landing zone. Rather than stressing overly dramatic 3D effects, Ubisoft focuses on the environments to give the experience a greater sense of depth.

We start out experimenting with the various weapons: pistol, machine gun, flamethrower, and grenade launcher. Avatar borrows the impressive fire effects system from its Ubisoft cousin Far Cry 2, so the flamethrower leaves lingering damage around the jungle environment. As we take down some lizard-esque wolves and killer plants we earn Effort Points that contribute to weapon and armor upgrades. We also unwittingly contribute to bonus-granting side tasks like defeating a certain amount of a specific enemy and finding certain objects. Special moves include a Predator-like temporary cloaking effect and a repulsor that pushes back swarming enemies.

Later in the stage we hop in a mech that surprisingly isn't slow as hell and tear through foes with a powerful gatling gun. Once we come to a clearing, a brief cutscene shows a large hammerhead rhino charge our mech and fling us out. Without the help of the mech, we must launch grenades at the creature and roll out of the way of its charges.

After the beast goes down, we try out some of the Na'vi gameplay. This melee-focused character primarily uses a staff, dual blades, and an axe. He can use a bow and arrow for long-range attacks, but it takes too long to reload for it to be an effective medium range tool. Maybe it was our short time with the character, but it felt strange to mash the right trigger for melee attacks. The small human enemies are difficult to see in the foliage, and it can be hard to determine where machine gun fire is coming from.

We didn't get hands-on time with the Wii, but it is a completely different game than the other platforms. Rather than viewing both sides of the conflict, players follow a Na'vi story only. Wii MotionPlus and the Balance Board are supported (though 3D is not), and the Wii version has a drop-in drop-out co-op mode. » **Bryan Vore**

Watch the Avatar game in action at www.gameinformer.com/mag

Celeb Voices

Ubisoft revealed that at least some of the actors from the film voice their characters in the game.

Sigourney Weaver
Dr. Grace Augustine
All platforms

Michelle Rodriguez
Trudy Chacon
All but Wii

Giovanni Ribisi
Parker Selfridge
Only on Wii

Stephen Lang
Col. Quaritch
All but Wii

Flying stages are interspersed throughout the campaign

StarCraft II: Wings of Liberty

BLIZZARD INVITES THE COMMUNITY TO MAKE MAPS AND MONEY

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1-Player Strategy
(Multiplayer TBA)

» **Publisher**
Activision

» **Developer**
Blizzard

» **Release**
2010

When Blizzard announced at Blizzcon 2008 that StarCraft II would be released as a trilogy of titles, each featuring a single playable race, some gamers cried foul, fingering this move as Blizzard's scheme to make more money. The more even-headed among us were willing to give a developer with Blizzard's record for quality the benefit of the doubt. Almost as if designed specifically to test our faith once more, Blizzcon 2009 revealed a brand new money sink for StarCraft II: Mapmakers will be able to publish premium maps on the new-and-improved Battle.net and charge for them.

Your knee-jerk reaction may be to grab your "No Money For Maps" signs and begin picketing Blizzard HQ, but this new frontier for user-created DLC may not be such a bad idea. Let's take a brief step back in time to Blizzard's last real-time strategy game, Warcraft III. One particularly popular Warcraft III mod called Defense of the Ancients transformed the game into a single-hero action-RPG, creating a blossoming sub-genre of maps that hit its peak with DotA: Allstars. Steve Feak, the talented designer behind Allstars, has moved on to a full-time job in the industry with Riot Games.

In that case, Feak got the recognition and eventual full-time work he deserved, but the Blizzard community also lost an excellent modder. The new Battle.net will give indie creators a reason to stick to Blizzard's games by allowing them to set a price for maps and mods they've created. Obviously there's some financial benefit to this for Blizzard as well – the company has not yet revealed what percentage of map sales they'll be taking – but the system will hopefully reward the best in the community and give them motivation to create even more imaginative maps.

As with Warcraft III, don't expect the StarCraft II maps and mods to be limited to real-time strategy retreads either. In fact, this editor appears to be even more powerful, with Blizzard showing a variety of examples of new game types ranging from a classic top-down shooter to a close-up third-person shooter featuring Nova, the main character of Blizzard's indefinitely postponed spin-off, StarCraft: Ghost. Another example introduced the "Uberlisk," a custom-made giant Zerg creature with a number of powerful "spine-crawlers" grafted to his back. Blizzard promised that even creating wild new units like this will not involve any coding experience beyond using their editor. If the possibilities are as endless as Blizzard has led us to believe, it may be just as worthwhile to pay money for a new experience in the StarCraft II engine as it is for a few new Rock Band tracks or the latest Xbox Live Arcade game.

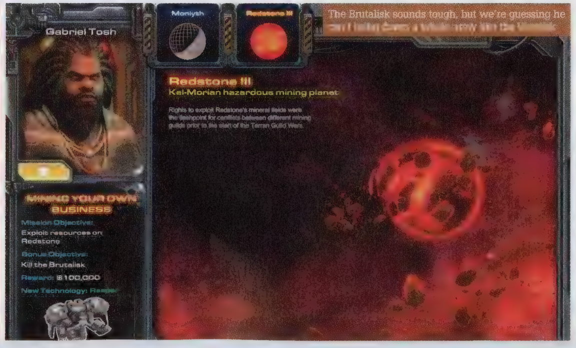
Of course, for those entirely uninterested in giving Blizzard access to an even greater chunk of their checkbook, StarCraft II and the updated Battle.net service will provide all the regular, completely free multiplayer action you'd expect with some sweet new perks. Do your StarCraft teammates also play World of Warcraft? Now you'll be able to see when they're logged on to Blizzard's other mega-hit (or any future games from the developer) and message them in-game. StarCraft II will also feature a robust achievement system that Blizzard says is more mature and polished than the achievement system they implemented in WoW last year.

Matchmaking for general multiplayer has also received an impressive overhaul. After playing a handful of online games, the new skill-based matchmaking system will assign you to a certain rank ranging from beginner (Copper) to expert (Platinum and Pro). Along with a persistent Battle.net ID, this new system ensures that hardcore players won't be able to get a high ranking simply by starting a fresh account and griefing new, less-skilled players.

Despite all the awesome improvements being made to StarCraft II's map editor and online play, it's impossible to argue with those who have already decided that Blizzard's only in it for the money. Some people will see any attempt to try something different as a callous cash-grab, and luckily they can vote with their wallets. As long as the StarCraft community can produce some exciting new maps and modes, mine will be wide open. » **Phil Kollar**

Read interviews with the brains behind Battle.net and StarCraft II at www.gameinformer.com/mag

If the new units already in the game aren't enough, [illegible]



The Brutalisk sounds tough, but we're guessing he [illegible]

Redstone III
Kel-Morian hazardous mining planet

Rights to exploit Redstone's mineral fields were the flashpoint for conflicts between different mining guilds prior to the start of the Terran Guild Wars.

MINING YOUR OWN BUSINESS

Mission Objective:
Exploit resources on Redstone

Bonus Objective:
Kill the Brutalisk

Reward: $100,000

New Technology: Reaper

Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare – Reflex

CAN THE JUGGERNAUT FPS MAKE THE GENRE VIABLE ON Wii?

When Nintendo first announced the capabilities of the Wii remote, many speculated the system would revolutionize the FPS genre. It seemed a natural enough assumption, with the nunchuk handling movement and the remote tackling the aiming and shooting. Almost three years later, it's clear that the genre hasn't flourished on Nintendo's console. Metroid Prime 3, Medal of Honor, and The Conduit have proven that first-person controls on the Wii can be smooth and accessible, but other factors have prevented a full-scale FPS revolution. The Wii's cumbersome online system prevents easy access to friends, the Wii Zapper is a poorly designed joke of a peripheral, and there still isn't a widely used voice device for communicating in multiplayer matches (how many people do you know with WiiSpeak?).

Treyarch hopes to change that by bringing one of the most successful first-person shooters of all time to the Wii. Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare – Reflex includes the full multiplayer experience from the PS3 and 360 versions. For the most part, this is a lower-resolution version of the shooter we all know and love. Treyarch is trying to make the Wii version match the original as closely as possible, but there are some minor additions. The most noteworthy is a feature that resembles a co-op mode, allowing a second player to play along in the main campaign. The first player controls all movement, while the second player has a separate reticle allowing them to shoot alongside the first player at onscreen enemies. This works much in the same way as Super Mario Galaxy or the Wii version of Call of Duty: World at War, meaning a second player can join in or drop out at any time without disrupting gameplay.

Online multiplayer is limited to ten players, and there is no voice support whatsoever. While these limitations negatively affect the online experience, Treyarch offers one significant improvement: a new host migration feature. Players are no longer booted to the lobby if a host leaves the match, which means no more unexpected and abrupt endings to matches. If you have a list of Wii friends, it's possible to directly import them into COD 4 without having to manually enter any additional codes. It seems odd that this is worth mentioning as a feature in 2009, but it's definitely a plus considering how many hoops Wii owners have to jump through to play against their friends online.

The most immediately noticeable change will obviously be in the visual department. Treyarch is attempting to make the game look as good as possible by improving upon the graphics engine used for last year's World at War; the textures, fire effects, and explosions look surprisingly good for a Wii game. The developers also claim the game runs at a consistent 30 frames per second.

It won't be easy for Modern Warfare's Wii debut to garner attention. The original came out almost two years ago, and (most importantly) the entire gaming world's eyes will be firmly fixed on Modern Warfare 2 this holiday. If this were released a few months after COD 4's initial debut, this decision would make more sense. As it is, Activision is definitely gambling. If Treyarch comes through with its promise of fully customizable controls and the uncut multiplayer experience, Wii owners might have something to look forward to come November. » **Dan Ryckert**

For a side-by-side comparison of Xbox 360/Wii Call of Duty 4 screenshots, head to www.gameinformer.com/mag

» **Platform**
Wii

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Shooter
(10-Player Online)

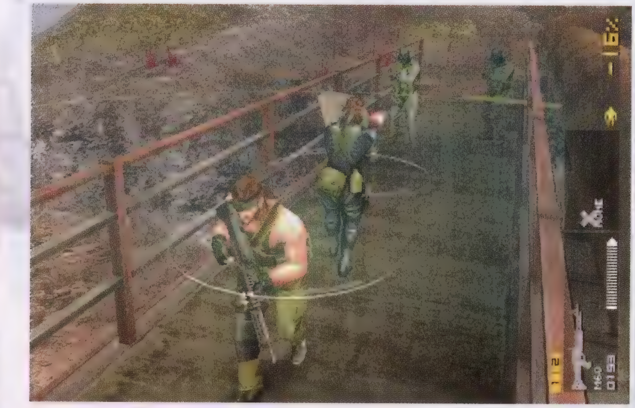
» **Publisher**
Activision

» **Developer**
Treyarch

» **Release**
November 10th

Metal Gear Solid: Peace Walker

KOJIMA RETURNS TO THE SMALL SCREEN WITH BIG AMBITIONS



» **Platform**
PSP

» **Style**
1-Player Action (4-Player Local, Online TBA)

» **Publisher**
Konami

» **Developer**
Kojima Productions

» **Release**
2010

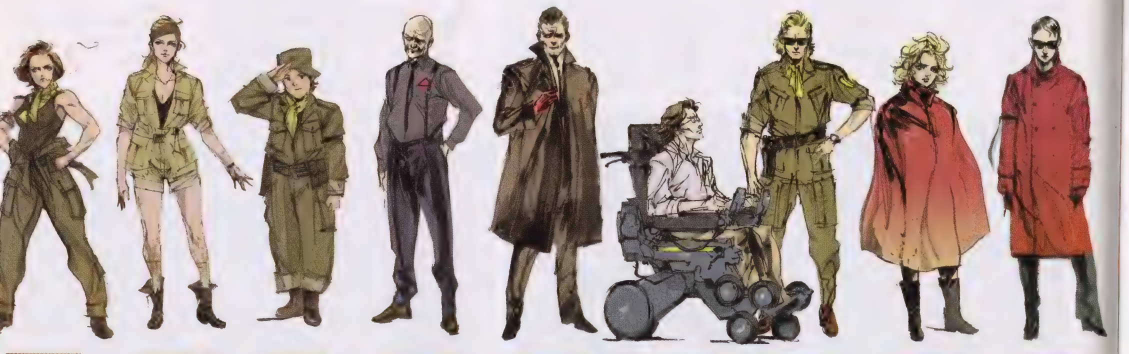
Details on the latest Metal Gear Solid game have been as hard to track down as Big Boss and his clones. Producer Hideo Kojima has kept a tight grasp on the information spigot, revealing a drop here, a drip there. After the game was shown at this year's Tokyo Game Show, however, we finally have a deluge of info to report.

Peace Walker takes place in Latin America in 1974, after the events of Metal Gear Solid: Portable Ops. The army Big Boss was amassing in that game is now known as Militaires Sans Frontières, or Soldiers Without Borders. His army's primary job in the game will be to protect the defenseless Costa Rican people against a mercenary force that's quite possibly funded by the C.I.A. Big Boss is reluctant to take the job from Galvez, a professor who lectures on the subject of peace, but Snake's mysterious partner Miller pushes him to come around. OK, he's almost certainly McDonnell Miller, AKA Master Miller, an old codec buddy. Galvez brings in Paz, a young Costa Rican girl tortured by the mercs, to appeal to Big Boss's human side. Quick side-note: You can look through her clothes during this cutscene with the d-pad.

Fortunately, Big Boss won't be battling these mercs alone. The game's new CO-OPS system allows up to four players to work together in combat and infiltration missions. A number of new features have been created to ensure that the game isn't just Metal Gear Solid with extra players. As characters get closer to one another, rings appear at their bases (à la Metal Gear Solid 4). Characters who are close enough to their partners can swap ammo and equipment, increase healing speed, and use some interesting tactical maneuvers. One of those moves lets players snake around areas in tandem. As one character acts as a driver of sorts, the other follows closely behind, automatically. The follower can even pull out his gun and cover the rear while the leader is sprinting away from danger.

One of the most intriguing new additions is the Fulton System, a balloon that inflates instantly to carry away knocked out enemy troops. When pressed on the subject the developers clammed up, but this is most definitely the new recruitment system. This is great news for Portable Ops fans forced to drag bodies all the way back to Campbell's shady truck. » **Jeff Cork**

For character galleries and the latest trailer, head to www.gameinformer.com/mag



Amanda Cecile Chico Coldman Galvez Huey Miller Paz Strangelove

Okamiden: Chisaki Taiyo

CHIBI-STYLE OKAMI SEQUEL BOUND FOR DS

The original Okami brought classical Japanese aesthetics to Zelda-style gameplay on the PlayStation 2 in 2006. The experiment by now-defunct Clover Studios was a critical darling that never found commercial success to match its warm reception. Recently, Capcom announced a DS sequel for the Japanese market called Okamiden: Chisaki Taiyo (loosely translated as "Okami Tales: The Small Sun").

Magical wolf cub Chibiterasu, the offspring of previous protagonist Amaterasu, is summoned by Sakuya on another quest to restore light and life to the world. Okamiden is set a mere few months after the end of Okami, but the demons Amaterasu drove off are back and sucking life from the world once more. What Capcom has revealed so far implies that as with the original game, Okamiden will explore similar themes of harmony, beauty, and responsibility.

Chibiterasu will team up with a series of partners that will ride around on the cub's back. The first announced partner appearing is named Kuninushi and he is somehow the young son of Susano and Kushi from the original Okami, though he has managed to grow into a young boy in a matter of months. Apparently, this mystery will be explained throughout the course of the game.

Okamiden includes a mix of environmental puzzles and light combat. Players can cause trees to bloom, restore broken bridges, slash enemies, and more by drawing appropriate shapes on the touch screen with what is now called the Celestial Pen. At times Kuninushi will have to jump off of Chibiterasu's back to solve puzzles. Players will trace a path on the ground for the boy to follow. This will lead him across areas like rickety bridges that can't support much weight to pick up treasures or hit switches. We don't yet know whether the different partners have other unique abilities or if they are merely story props.

The hand-drawn visual style is a perfect fit for the DS. What has been shown of the game evokes the classical beauty of Japanese painting. Watching a dead tree blossom into vibrant color is its own reward. Smooth animation and excellent art direction play their parts to make Okamiden look as good as anything on Nintendo's handheld.

If Okamiden can fulfill a significant part of its promise and live up to the first game's legacy, it could be a standout on the DS. Hopefully Capcom will announce a stateside release date soon so that we can mark our calendars.
» **Adam Biessener**

Watch the latest trailer at gameinformer.com/mag

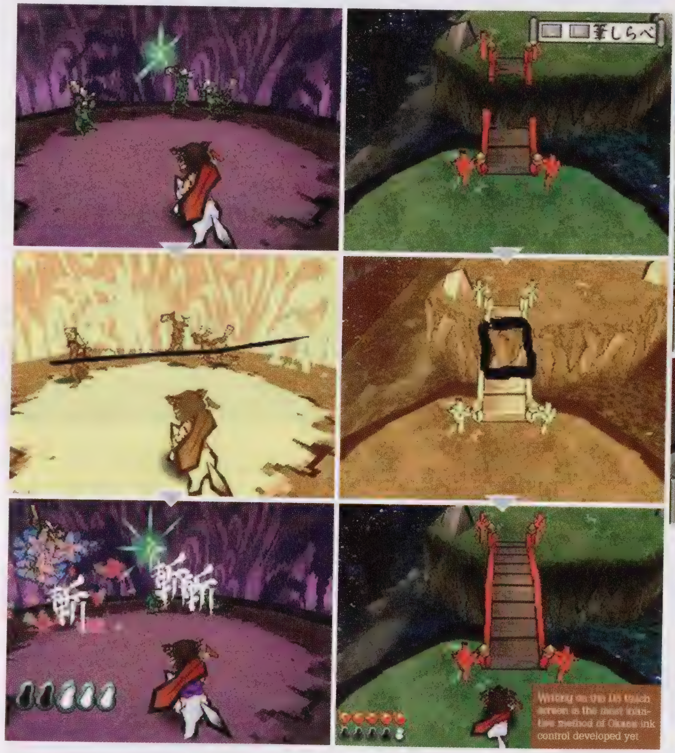
» **Platform**
Nintendo DS

» **Style**
1-Player Action/Adventure

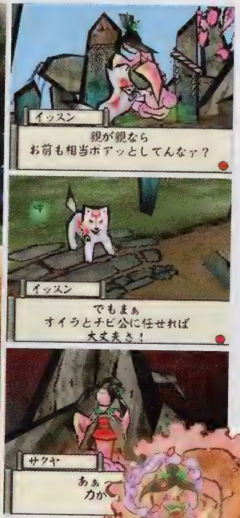
» **Publisher**
Capcom

» **Developer**
Capcom

» **Release**
2010 (Japan)



Writing on the DS touch screen is the most intuitive method of Okami ink control developed yet



Battlefield: Bad Company 2

DICE SERVES UP A FRESH BATCH OF DESTRUCTION

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3 •
Xbox 360 • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Shooter
(32-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Electronic Arts

» **Developer**
DICE

» **Release**
March 2010

Battlefield: Bad Company may have alienated PC gamers with its console-only appearance, but DICE senior producer Patrick Bach believes the decision to dedicate the experience to consoles bodes well for the franchise's future.

"One of the things we learned is that you can build a proper Battlefield multiplayer experience on a console," Bach recalls. "We hadn't really gone into that territory before – making an all out, full-on Battlefield."

For the sequel, Bach and his team plan to use those lessons to full capacity, intensifying the game's signature brand of open expanse warfare filled with destructible environments, vehicular combat, and deep progression systems. Rather than achieving this by upping the player count to 64 players (like it traditionally was on PCs), DICE is focused on honing elements of the first game that came up short.

"Player count is a hot potato," Bach remarks. "Some think bigger is better. We want to make more and better use of the players we have." To that end the team is responding to several common community complaints by improving vehicle handling, allowing full environmental destruction, and tweaking squadmate spawning. The hope is that these fixes will result in more intense and action-packed battles.

Blackhawk helicopters equipped with two miniguns also help drive up the explosion factor. These transport choppers can fit an entire squad, allowing talented teams to rain bullets on infantry to rack up the kills. Now that soldiers can deploy parachutes, squads can also use the choppers to employ hit-and-run tactics on gold crates or conquest flags. On the ground, DICE is adding nimble ATVs to the fray that allow two people to cruise quickly though hot zones.

DICE has always had a reputation of giving Battlefield titles great post-launch support, but that wasn't the case with Bad Company. Glitches still exist in the game to this day, leaving many to wonder if the DICE philosophy has changed regarding post-game support. Bach insists that the problem had more to do with figuring out the proper patching strategy on consoles, not a shift in philosophy. While the PC platform allowed DICE to issue patches whenever it saw fit, the consoles have limited memory and patches to service the community, which means the developer needs to do a better job prioritizing to make sure the most necessary changes make the cut.

"We're looking into a lot of community management this time around because we actually agree that we could have done a better job at handling the community in Bad Company," Bach admits. "The whole studio is looking into how we can get better at handling community issues."

Bach says the team has several more exciting new features to reveal, including two new game modes focused on squad play. Stay tuned in the coming months for more information. » **Matt Bertz**

Gold Rush and Conquest modes return, but DICE also plans to reveal two new modes in the coming months

Bad Company 2 multiplayer features 50 persistent ranks for soldiers to climb. By earning battlefield experience in typical Battlefield fashion, experience also unlocks new weapons, gadgets, and specializations

The Death Of The Sniper?

Game Informer has received several letters from concerned Battlefield fans (read: snipers) concerning the introduction of the kill cam made famous by Call of Duty. So what's the deal – is it in the game? "Yes," says senior producer Patrick Bach.

But before you bend your sniper rifles over your knees in anger, DICE begs you to hear them out. "The reason why we're doing this is not to screw with people and reveal where people are hiding," Bach assures us. "It's more of a tool to show off the person that killed you, so you can see your enemies." Bad Company 2 features a vengeance system that awards you more experience points for hunting down your killer. In addition, the kill cam reveals valuable information on your killer indicating his or her specializations, weapon loadout, and rank.

DICE claims the cameras are tweaked to make sure they don't give away your favorite sniping location; the camera cuts to an up-close view of the soldier instead. "People have to trust us that this will actually work," Bach states. "It won't take away the surprise for sniping fans."

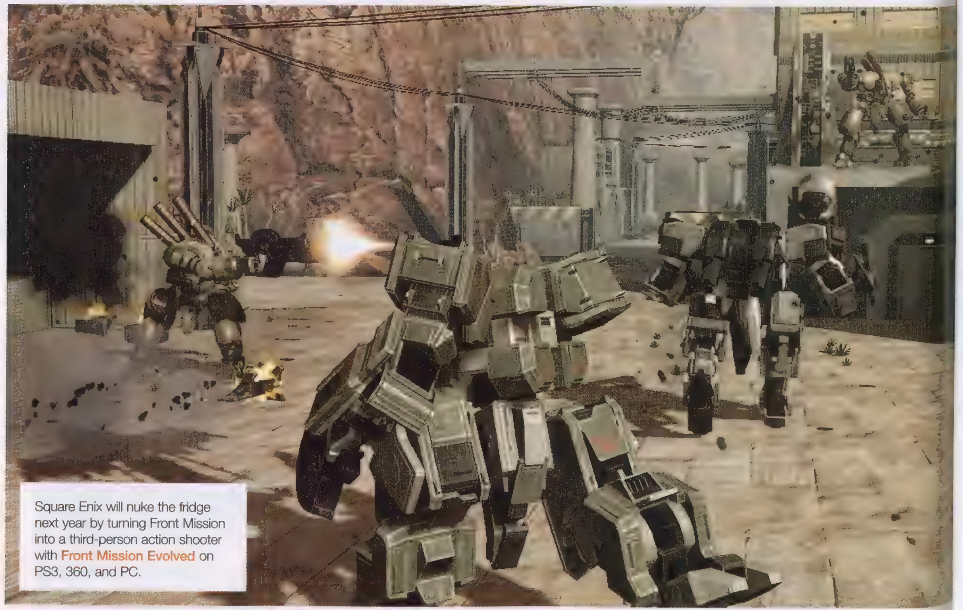
Building The Perfect Soldier

Bad Company 2 features four traditional soldier classes – assault, recon, engineer, and medic. The assault class is your standard grunt, the recon class focuses on maneuverability and sniping, the engineer can fix vehicles and lay mines, and the medic can revive fallen soldiers with the defibrillator. In addition to choosing a class, players can fully customize weapon kits to suit their play style by selecting primary weapons, secondary weapons, gadgets, and specializations. Like perks in Call of Duty 4, specializations allow players to select abilities to give them an edge in combat. Aggressive assault soldiers may want an increased clip, while mobile attackers may want a stamina specialization for sprinting faster. If you spend a lot of time in vehicles, the armor specialization may come in handy. DICE tabulates that more than 15,000 kit variations exist.

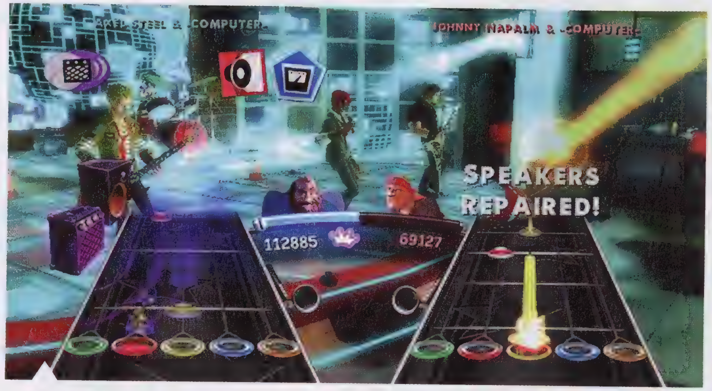
Wii

Academy of Champions: Soccer

You think Dolores Umbridge put the Hogwarts students at risk? Pelé is recruiting ruthless Ubisoft characters like Altaïr and Sam Fisher for his soccer academy take on Harry Potter coming this fall. The game features five-on-five party soccer, minigames, and support for WiiMotion Plus and the Wii Balance Board.



Square Enix will nuke the fridge next year by turning Front Mission into a third-person action shooter with **Front Mission Evolved** on PS3, 360, and PC.



PS3 • 360 • Wii

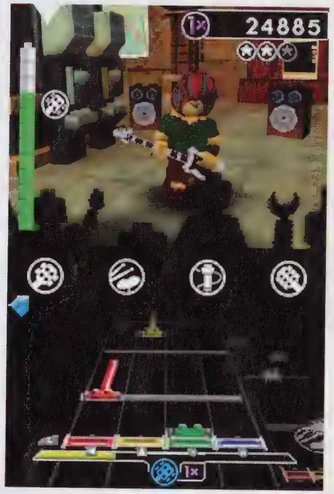
Band Hero

The PS3 and 360 versions of music games have always had the upper hand, but Wii owners may finally get some bragging rights this November. Using DS connectivity, users can browse songs and create a playlist while their friends are playing songs in party mode. A new Roadie Battle mode pits two guitar players against each other while "roadies" on two DSes try to sabotage/repair the guitarists' gear, essentially screwing up the note highways.

DS

LEGO Rock Band

DS players jealous of the PSP's Rock Band Unplugged can finally get in on some Amplitude-style gameplay this November as long as they don't mind the coat of LEGO paint.



360

Ninety-Nine Nights II

Though it was announced at last year's Tokyo Game Show, info on the follow up to the Dynasty Warriors-style action game has been scarce. Turns out the game is changing hands completely, with Konami replacing Microsoft as the publisher (at least in Japan) and FeelPlus reportedly replacing Q Entertainment and Phantagram as the developer. Konami has not yet committed to a U.S. release.

PSP

Valkyria Chronicles 2

The first Valkyria Chronicles was a PS3 exclusive, but gamers will face a smaller battlefield next summer when Sega brings the sequel to PSP. Set two years after the original, Valkyria Chronicles 2 focuses on a new batch of military cadets, but it features the same signature art style and battle system.

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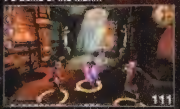
reviews


PC Game of the Month

Dragon Age: Origins

gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH

102 Uncharted 2: Among Thieves

Uncharted 2: Among Thieves is more than an action game, more than an Indiana Jones simulator, and more than a must-play experience...it's one of the true masterpieces of this generation in gaming.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Passable. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	I know your game sucks, and Imma let you finish, but Fuzion Frenzy 2 was one of the worst games of all time. Of all time!

AWARDS

gameinformer PLATINUM	Awarded to games that score between 9.75 and 10
gameinformer GOLD	Awarded to games that score between 9 and 9.5
gameinformer SILVER	Awarded to games that score between 8.5 and 8.75
gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH	The award for the most outstanding game in the issue

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Brütal Legend

TIM SCHAFER RAISES HIS GOBLET OF ROCK

8

PS3 • 360

» Concept
Stitch together an all-star cast, real-time strategy battles, hand-to-hand combat, open-world exploration, and Tim Schafer's signature humor into a proper metal tribute

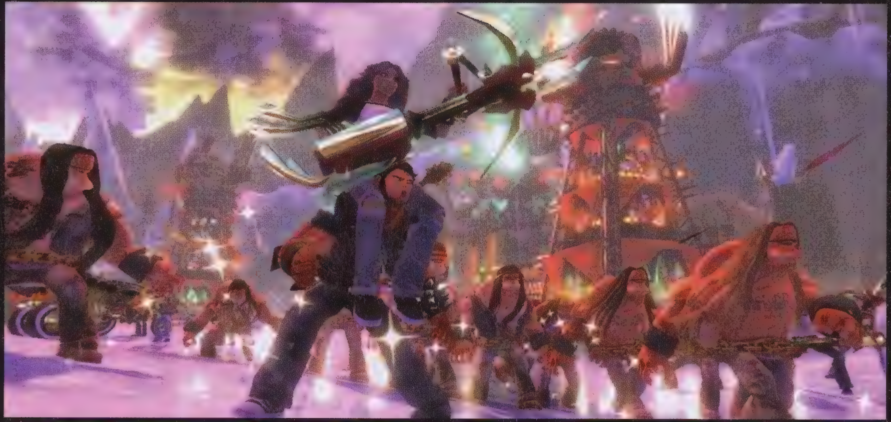
» Graphics
Double Fine brings metal album covers to life, delivering the most memorable art direction of the year

» Sound
A deep cut metal soundtrack complements great voiceover work by Jack Black, Ozzy Osbourne, Lemmy Kilmister, and co.

» Playability
The basic fighting controls suffice, but the real-time strategy battles underwhelm with tricky battle commands

» Entertainment
A must-play for any fan of metal or Tim Schafer

» Replay Value
Moderately low



Style 1-Player Action/Strategy (8-Player Online) **Publisher** Electronic Arts **Developer** Double Fine **Release** October 13 **ESRB** M

What a long, strange ride it's been for heavy metal. A movement that started as a critically reviled cacophony of distorted amps, screeching vocals, and gaudy guitar solos has proven exceptionally resilient, with its biggest bands selling out stadiums across the world over three decades. Metal faced many near-death moments that would have killed lesser genres – men in make-up, spandex, and Fred Durst – but it ultimately persevered, crossing over into new media with triumphant success stories like *Metalocalypse* and Guitar Hero. Famed game developer Tim Schafer grew up during metal's rise to popularity, and Brütal Legend serves as his ode to the heavy, brooding music of his adolescence. This is a fantastical metal opus stitched together from album covers, rock videos, band merch, and live concerts.

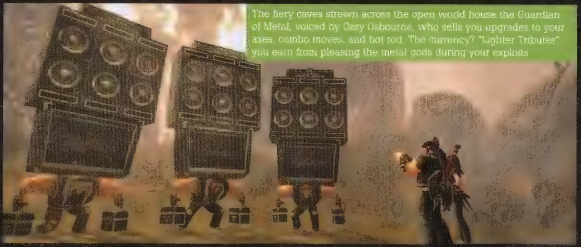
Brütal Legend follows the exploits of Eddie Riggs, a roadie voiced by Jack Black who gets transported to an alternate dimension steeped in metal lore after he spills blood on his belt buckle during a stage mishap. The evil Lord Doviculus and his demons have enslaved humanity, and Riggs joins dreamy resistance frontman Lars Halford's cause to return mankind to righteousness. This tour won't be easy, however, as Riggs encounters tragedy, lost love, and his own shady past as he struggles to harness the power of metal and dethrone Doviculus. Tim Schafer's signature sense of humor is pervasive throughout, with subtle metal references and laugh-out-loud one-liners strewn across the narrative.

Eddie proves no slouch in the combat arena, bludgeoning enemies with his axe, shredding his guitar for ranged lightning attacks, and turning demons into road kill with his steel chariot, The Deuce. Double Fine's combat controls aren't difficult to master, but the action is kept fresh with combos, double team attacks that pair Eddie with his comrades, and special powers Eddie calls to his aid via guitar riffs. These creative and highly useful attacks range from melting the faces of the enemies around him to calling in a flaming zeppelin that crashes to the ground, eliminating or severely damaging everyone in its path. Metal indeed.

Riggs unlocks these powers by scavenging the land for Tab Slabs, large rock structures that teach the destructive guitar solos. Finding them isn't easy given the open world's breadth, but fantastic art direction guarantees the drive is filled with awe-inspiring monuments to metal. From the screeching wall of amps to the mountains of skulls, the world of Brütal Legend is living, breathing album cover, and one of the most imaginative game worlds I have visited. Collectibles and side missions with cameo performances from Kyle Gass and Brian Posehn litter the explorable metalscape.

To win the land back from his enemies, Eddie must engage in "Stage Battles," the centerpiece to the Brütal Legend combat and multiplayer experience. To win these action/real-time strategy hybrid battles, you must gain control of "fan geysers" by building merch booths on top of them to harness the fan spirits. With the fans on his side, Eddie can call a great array of varied unit types to arms, or turn the tide of battle by joining the fray himself. RTS battles rely on split second decisions, but Brütal Legend's cumbersome command system stretches your patience to wit's end. If your tactics aren't sound from the first note there is rarely a course of recovery. The multiplayer gives you the chance to control the goth/emo and demonic factions you battle in the single-player game, but with the core mechanic so unreliable I can't see this being a destination mode.

The unwieldy Stage Battles maim the battle system and multiplayer, but this gaffe doesn't take away from Brütal Legend's charm. If you're a fan of Tim Schafer's humor and the type of person who decides between wearing a Metallica and Slayer tee-shirt when you wake up, this is a must-play. » **Matt Bertz**



The fiery caves strewn across the open world house the Guardian of Metal, voiced by Ozzy Osbourne, who sells you upgrades to your axes, combo moves, and hot rod. The currency? "Lighter Tributes" you earn from pleasing the metal gods during your exploits

Check out behind-the-scenes footage of Brütal Legend's all-star cast at www.gameinformer.com/mag

Second Opinion 8.25

Brütal Legend is hilariously scripted, brilliantly imaginative, visually and aurally arresting, and frequently unpolished throughout its many varied approaches to gameplay. The game borrows endlessly from every genre you can think of: RPG story and upgrade systems, large-scale RTS battles, open world exploration, and everything in between. Many of those systems have flaws; simplification of each gameplay mechanic is so severe that it hurts the experience. In particular, the strategy sections can be frustrating to navigate until you learn some workarounds. The good news is that you might not notice, given how absorbed you'll be in the amazing setting that Double Fine has crafted. From the huge list of licensed music to the environments stuffed full of rock metaphors, the game is one big homage to metal, couched in the irreverent humor you'd expect from Tim Schafer. It's not perfect, but you owe it to yourself to explore one of the most clever and engaging fictional worlds in years. » **Matt Miller**

WWE SmackDown vs. RAW 2010

RASSLIN' RETURNS WITH SOME WELCOME ADDITIONS AND OLD FRUSTRATIONS

8.25

PS3 • 360

» Concept
Ludicrous amounts of features and match types make this a WWE fan's dream

» Graphics
Stellar character models for the wrestlers, but occasional issues with animations and collision detection

» Sound
The music and sound effects add to the game's authenticity, and the grapplers do some decent voice-over work. Commentary is a mixed bag

» Playability
Gamers can easily learn how to perform certain actions using the new training facility, a welcome addition to the series

» Entertainment
It's still the best wrestling game available, but significant improvements need to be made in terms of AI

» Replay Value
Moderately High

John Morrison practices moves he learned while playing infamous

Style 1 to 4-Player Fighting (4-Player Online) **Publisher** THQ **Developer** Yuke's **Release** October 19 **ESRB** T

World Wrestling Entertainment features a constantly changing landscape from year to year. Good guys turn into bad guys between pay-per-view events, wrestlers switch between the three brands, and their entire gimmick often receives a full overhaul. Because of all this change, keeping SmackDown vs. RAW current is far more than just a roster update. Yuke's has done a great job of giving the hardcore WWE fans what they want, as well as keeping it accessible for casual viewers.

One of the most significant new features in SmackDown vs. RAW 2010 is the training facility. Considering the sheer amount of match types, there's a staggering number of commands that players need to know. This training facility appears before the main menu, and allows you to perform moves at your own pace rather than in a preset order. Practicing is the most natural way to learn the SvR 2010 controls, and it's something the series could have used for a long time.

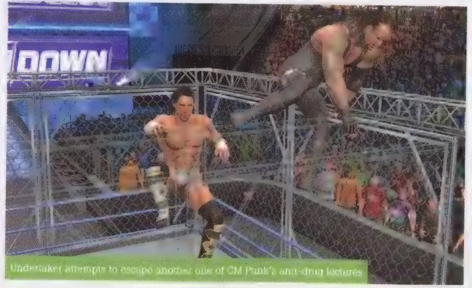
Despite the improved training method, several issues from the series' past are still apparent. Opponent AI is incredibly inconsistent, and it's not uncommon to see odd behavior such as John Morrison madly attacking each turnbuckle in succession, without a care in the world that he has an opponent in the ring. Wrestlers may interfere in your match and actually go for pinfalls against you despite their lack of involvement in the contest.

So much time has been spent adding new features to the game, but changes still need to be made regarding the core gameplay mechanics. It's easy to get frustrated numerous times during any given match. You might accidentally attack the referee and get disqualified, poor collision detection may get in the way of your dropkick connecting, and the camera may decide the best vantage point for your dramatic backbreaker is from directly behind the turnbuckle.

New features have been hit-or-miss for the series, but the Community Creations addition to this year's installment is definitely a positive step. Gamers can share their created superstars and storylines quickly and easily, which ensures that longtime WWE fans will have access to some classic feuds from wrestling's past. As one would expect, this will probably result in some hilarious and absurd plots as well. Considering how many aspects go into creating a storyline (dialogue, setting, cast, sound, booking matches, etc), the interface for doing so is surprisingly easy. Despite not being able to add actual voices to the wrestlers, you can enter all their lines easily with a USB keyboard.

Last year's Road to Wrestlemania mode is back, and should satisfy fans looking for fully produced stories complete with the actual wrestlers contributing voice work. New interactive cutscenes pop up from time to time, but most are simple "press A to punch this guy, B to punch this guy" affairs. One of the stories (Triple H and John Cena) appears to be a cooperative mode, but most of the time you're just taking turns fighting your own one-on-one matches. You'll team up in the occasional tag match or battle royal, but it's certainly not a full co-op experience.

Many minor improvements have been made, such as the red marks that appear after too many Flair-esque chops to the chest. Hardcore WWE fans can also manage the heel/face status of the superstars, their brand alliance, and their rivals/allies. These fans are the ones that will appreciate the little changes the most, but SmackDown vs. RAW 2010 is a solid title whether you have a closet full of Austin 3:16 shirts or just catch the occasional episode of RAW. » **Dan Ryckert**



Undertaker attempts to escape another one of CM Punk's anti-drug lectures

For a more in-depth look at what the new Community Creations mode benefits longtime wrestling fans, visit www.gameinformer.com/mag

Second Opinion 8.5

If you haven't played SvR in a while, this might be the year to jump back into the ring. Yuke's continues to expand the list of tools, now allowing online sharing of created characters. It also improved the in-ring action by giving more weight to every wrestler's finisher. I enjoyed the new created character story mode, but the co-op story only really lets you play together half the time. Still, my favorite new feature is the training mode, which boots up at the start screen so you can start laying the smack down without ever touching a menu. » **Ben Reeves**

NBA 2K10

A FRANCHISE WORTH ROOTING FOR

8.25

PS3 • 360

» **Concept**
Introduce the new My Player mode to the already stellar Association mode and signature 2K gameplay

» **Graphics**
Reworked arena lighting and facial animations keep the visuals on par with NBA Live

» **Sound**
With contextual analysis that discusses league happenings, this is the best broadcast commentary in sports games

» **Playability**
Offense dictates the games more frequently than last year, as off-the-ball defensemen are slow to rotate and tend to drift off their men

» **Entertainment**
The addition of NBA Today keeps 2K the most realistic hoops sim game around

» **Replay Value**
High

Style 1 to 4-Player Sports (10-Player Online) **Publisher** 2K Sports **Developer** Visual Concepts **Release** October 6 **ESRB** E

With four weeks left until the playoffs begin, my T-Wolves are in a dead heat for the final playoff seed. This does not go unnoticed to commentators Kevin Harlan and Clark Kellogg, who mention this fact just after tip-off. Halfway through the first quarter, the duo again turns its attention back to the playoff race, noting the Wolves need to perform well on this four-game road trip to have a fighting chance. What's this, contextual commentary in a sports video game? With NBA 2K10's introduction of NBA Today, meaningful broadcasting that reacts to your every franchise move is finally a reality.

NBA Today is the latest amazing improvement to the Association mode, which retains its status as best franchise mode in sports games. It captures the nuances of the sport better than any other mode of its kind, with player chemistry affecting your locker room, deep contract negotiation options, and realistic trade logic. On the court, NBA 2K10 defends its status as gameplay champion with a retooled post system that makes it easier to pull off fakes, drop steps, fadeaways, and moves to the hoop. Separating IsoMotion from the turbo button also helps you unleash killer dribbling moves without wasting your burst. These changes greatly aid the offensive rhythm of the experience, but defending attacks prove more difficult than in years past. Late defensive rotations and lazy defensemen who lose their marks often result in easy buckets for the opposition. The new animations also don't jive together as well as they did in years' past.

My Player, the newest mode introduced to NBA 2K10, requires the patience of a saint to enjoy. Like the Be A Pro mode, your player's grade fluctuates during the course of a game. But unlike that mode, the majority of your time is spent toiling in obscurity in the NBA Development League.

This mode's uphill struggle may not appeal to everyone, but the outstanding presentation and best-in-class Association mode still make NBA 2K10 the best basketball sim. » **Matt Bertz**

Find out what makes the NBA 2K10 franchise mode the best in the business at www.gameinformer.com/mag

NBA Live 10

ANOTHER REBUILDING YEAR, BUT SIGNS OF PROGRESS

7.5

PS3 • 360

» **Concept**
Another EA Sports hoops player trying to find its game

» **Graphics**
Stars look and act just like their real world counterparts, but the alien-looking, heavily goateed draft classes need big-time makeovers

» **Sound**
Broadcasting legend Marv Alberts returns with Steve Kerr to provide solid play-by-play

» **Playability**
The new freestyle passing controls are fun, but EA questionably dropped its solid L-trigger post play system

» **Entertainment**
Glaring issues like basketballs clipping through players and weak sideline negotiating keep the otherwise solid gameplay down. Franchise needs a complete reboot

» **Replay Value**
Moderately High

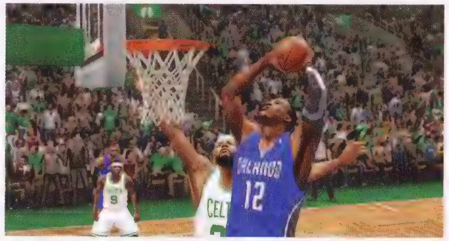
Style 1 to 4-Player Sports (10-Player Online) **Publisher** EA Sports **Developer** EA Canada **Release** October 6 **ESRB** E

After another loss to NBA 2K last year, EA Sports did what many bold franchise owners throughout sports history have done – signed the guy they couldn't beat. With former NBA 2K lead designer Mike Wang now at the helm of NBA Live, the franchise shows signs of life. But this dynasty won't be rebuilt overnight, and many ghosts from its failed past still haunt the court.

While NBA Live may not be on the level with NBA 2K yet, it sure looks the part. EA Canada nailed the presentation with smart commentary, stunning player models, and realistic animations. Players move dynamically off the ball, setting up screens and making cuts to the basket organically. Rebounding features more loose balls and tips, while on the perimeter slashing guards move fluidly and execute highlight reel passes with the new freestyle passing control.

Despite these improvements, players occasionally lock into animations, so they don't always pass the ball when you want. Sideline negotiation is a mess – players run out of bounds on fast breaks, their momentum carries them out of bounds in the offensive zone, and they sometimes needlessly dive to save a loose ball nowhere near the sideline. The most egregious gameplay issue? The ball constantly ghosts through bodies, arms, and rims. I even saw two players dunking on the rim at the same time, cutting right through one another.

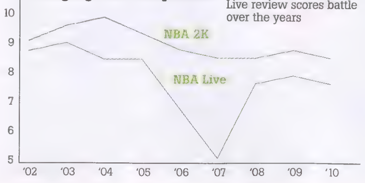
Gameplay complaints aside, the true albatross hanging on NBA Live's neck is the broken dynasty mode, which is the videogame equivalent to Jermaine O'Neal's bloated, franchise-crippling contact. Its brazen ineffectiveness to yield a worthwhile experience keeps the otherwise growing game from seriously competing with NBA 2K.

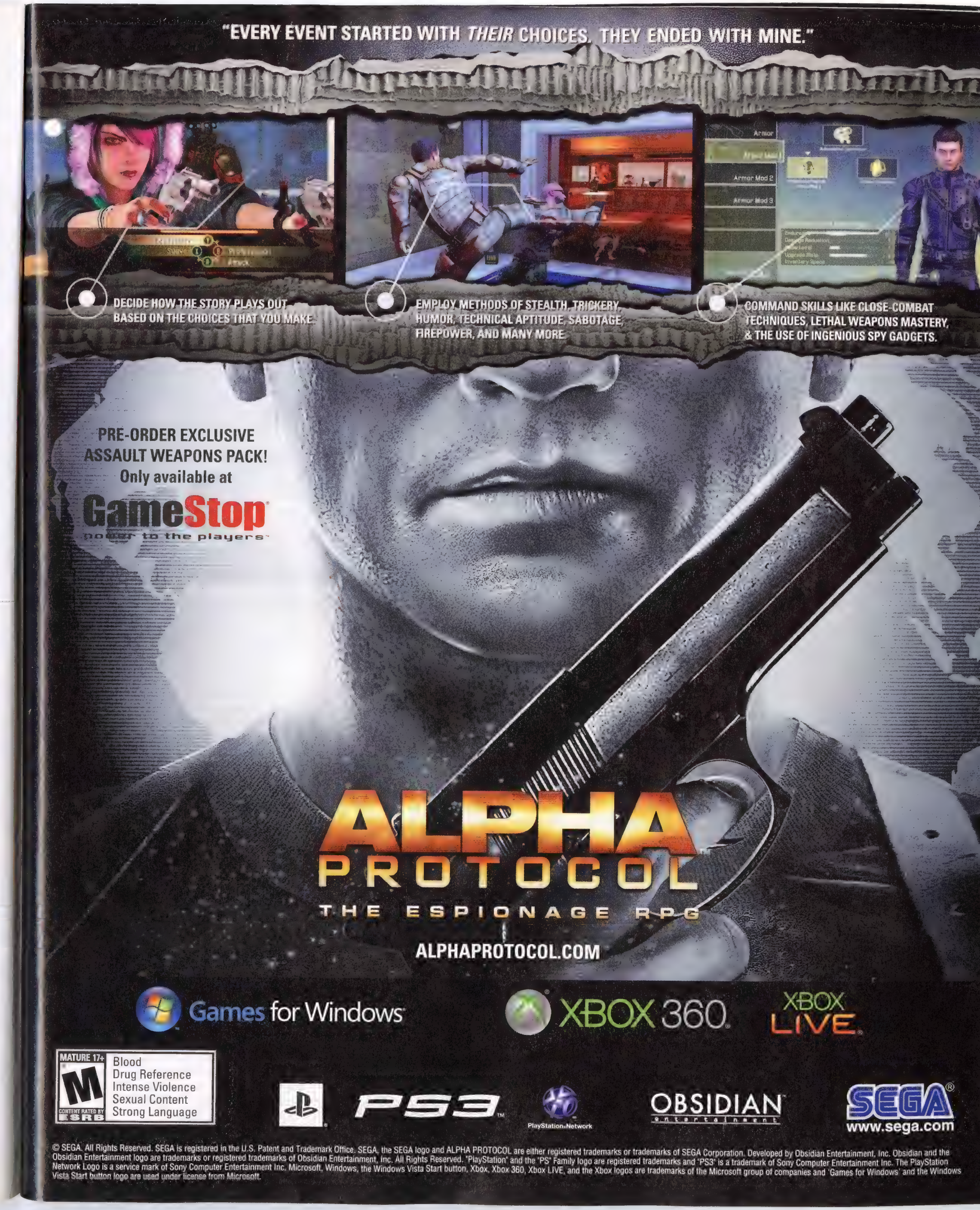


Players are better off skipping the dynasty altogether for the Dynamic Season, which allows rabid hoops fans to import real game scores into their season to keep the standings in line with the real NBA. Online, the Adidas Live Run allows players to set up five-on-five games with NBA players. Unfortunately the mode fails to support created players, robbing it of a sense of progression. The sketchy defensive controls, a problem in most hoops games, means competition results are still determined by who jacks up the worst shots.

In the end NBA Live 10 may have the glamorous look of a basketball superstar, but it still needs to round out its game to steal the crown of best hardcore hoops game from its rival.' » **Matt Bertz**

Gauging The Competition The NBA 2K versus NBA Live review scores battle over the years




"EVERY EVENT STARTED WITH *THEIR* CHOICES. THEY ENDED WITH MINE."
DECIDE HOW THE STORY PLAYS OUT BASED ON THE CHOICES THAT YOU MAKE.
EMPLOY METHODS OF STEALTH, TRICKERY, HUMOR, TECHNICAL APTITUDE, SABOTAGE, FIREPOWER, AND MANY MORE.
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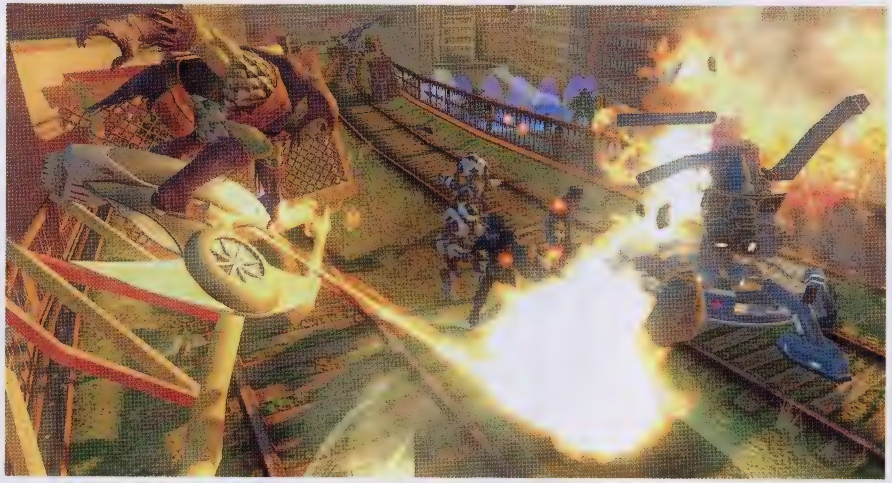
Marvel Ultimate Alliance 2

EVEN SUPERHEROES MAKE MISTAKES



7.5

PS3 • 360 • Wii

» **Concept**
New gameplay additions adversely affect what could have been an enjoyable brawler

» **Graphics**
The chaotic action paints a stunning picture, however, the original game's amazing CG cutscenes are replaced with crudely animated in-engine clips

» **Sound**
The roaring soundtrack screams supehero epic, but the characters interrupt it with groan-inducing one-liners

» **Playability**
Outside of the balance breaking fusions, the controls are spot-on, and the diversity in hero choices bring variety to the fray

» **Entertainment**
Comic fans will get a kick out of the character choices, but the action doesn't retain the brilliance of the original

» **Replay Value**
Moderately High

Style 1 to 4-Player Action (4-Player Online) **Publisher** Activision **Developer** Vicarious Visions **Release** Sept 15 **ESRB** T

A young boy who reads a Spider-Man comic book may walk away pretending that he can shoot webs out of his wrists. An adult who reads that same story may walk away thinking about how the world's political climate is changing. Depending on who reads the comic, its story could be interpreted as an action-packed adventure or a political allegory. That's the beauty of most comic books. They speak to different age groups in myriad ways.

Marvel Ultimate Alliance 2's story had the potential to draw similar reactions from its players, as it is based on one of Marvel Comics' most politically charged and action-packed arcs, *Civil War*. Viewed as a commentary on post 9/11 American civil liberties, this brilliant comic details the government's attempted super human registration and the resulting backlash. The comic pulls no punches in its parallels to world events, and paints a bleak future for the world, even going as far to show Captain America (a character who wears the American flag on his chest) chained as an enemy of the world. The game dives into the heart of the story, splitting the world's greatest heroes into two camps – those for super human registration, and those against it. While this creates an interesting dynamic in the character selection pool (Captain America and Iron Man are on opposing sides), the story in the game is stripped of its controversial views and shocking moments. The game focuses more on beloved heroes punch each other in the face.

This is a missed opportunity to tell a powerful story, not to mention an odd choice for a game's foundation if the developer didn't intend to see it through to its mind-blowing conclusion. Even if the story pulls you along aimlessly, punching faces is what this game does best Raven Software laid the groundwork for a powerful button-mashing experience with this series' previous iteration, and Activision's stand-in developer of choice, Vicarious Visions, didn't miss a beat delivering the same thrills. The keyword being "same."

From Spider-Man's long-ranged web attacks to Wolverine's up-close-and-personal claw strikes, the combat system feels like a well-worn glove, only now most of its glaring wrinkles have been ironed out. The new on-the-fly upgrade system removes the hassle of entering the pause screen, which is great for four-player co-op. The waypoint beacon is a non-intrusive way of pointing players in the right direction, and the healing/revival tokens remove the need to backtrack to a warp portal.

The one area where Vicarious took liberties is the implementation of the fusion attack. As cool as it is to see Gambit supercharging one of Storm's tornados, these moves are far too powerful. They can wipe out a dozen enemies, topple bosses, and act as "Get Out of Jail Free" cards for tough battles. Why bother coordinating tactics with friends when you can just unite powers to clear out everyone? The fusion attacks also fail to elicit excitement in their composition. While several shining examples demonstrate the fusion attacks' true potential, most of them utilize generic templates void of the characters' unique powers.

The one area where this game hits comic fans with an undeniable uppercut is the roster, both for the playable characters and bosses. Along with Marvel's heavy-hitters, B-team recruits like Penance and Songbird prove to be a blast to play. Thor and Hulk sadly cannot be played until a certain number of doodads are collected, but reward you well for your efforts. Cameo appearances are in great abundance as well. Altogether, the selection of characters delivers a complete view of the Marvel Universe as of *Civil War*'s writing in 2006. The last boss/playable character does not deserve the same praise. Let's just say he makes the theatrical version of Deadpool look good.

Toward the conclusion of this game, Iron Man and Captain America exchange an awkward "I can't believe that just happened" look. This odd moment captures my feelings on the game. The core action is top-notch, and the roster rocks, but the Fusion attacks and half-hearted story hurt the experience, turning a once great play into a punchless grind. » **Andrew Reiner**

Vote for the character you'd most like to see included in the first DLC pack at www.gameinformer.com/mag

The Story Behind the Game

Since the game doesn't follow through on the story, we recommend reading the *Civil War and The Death of Captain America* trades before playing.

Second Opinion 8

The idiom "lost in translation," comes to mind here. While adapting one of the most epic comic events in recent history, some things were bound to get cut. Unfortunately, those ended up being many of the comic's more spectacular action moments and nearly all of its meaningful social commentary. Thankfully the nuts and bolts of this environmentally destructive action/RPG haven't changed much. The new dual hero fusion attacks range from awesome (Storm plus Human Torch) to merely functional (Wolverine plus Captain America). Technical improvements, like being able to resurrect heroes at anytime or reallocate power points after leveling up, also help smooth out the experience. While series fans will be happy with the tweaks, for the most part, MUA 2 is largely the same game we've been playing for years. » **Ben Reeves**

FIFA 10

FIFA 10 HAS THAT WINNING FEELING

Style 1 to 7-Player Sports (PS3) 1 to 4-Player (360) (20-Player Online) **Publisher** EA Sports **Developer** EA Canada **Release** October 20 **ESRB** E

gameinformer SILVER

8.5

PS3 • 360

» **Concept**
FIFA comes out playing like it's an important qualifier

» **Graphics**
When it comes to faces and player models, the game's pretty average. The match-day presentation could also use some improvements

» **Sound**
The announcers are sometimes behind the action, but they'll comment on recent form, your manager's job status, and your celebrations

» **Playability**
When you're playing with manual player switching, it can be frustrating not knowing when you do or do not have the ball

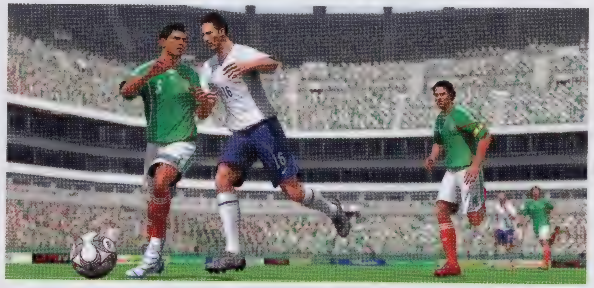
» **Entertainment**
Not a huge leap forward, but more fun than it's ever been

» **Replay Value**
Moderately High

During my first season as manager of Manchester City, I brought the team and its fans The Double – winning both the Premier League and the FA Cup. Needless to say, we were ecstatic, and it was no easy feat. It required using the transfer market to collect the right players, a few lucky bounces, and the emergence of striker Carlos Tévez as a lethal finisher. I couldn't have done it without FIFA 10.

My first act as the new manager of Manchester City was to dive into the transfer market. Not satisfied with my keeper or depth in the midfield, I picked up an obscure goalie and Portuguese midfielder Maniche for cheap. Both proved to be vital to the club. The fact that both of them were near the top of the transfer list but weren't big names being signed for low bucks shows that some of last year's problems with the transfer market have been fixed.

On the pitch, my team created its own luck, using skill moves for one-on-one situations, controlling the ball with good trapping, and making good attacking runs with off-the-ball players. I also have to credit FIFA 10's loose ball physics, as I scored a few goals by easily cleaning up sloppy clearances in front of opponents' goals. My keeper showed mettle, avoiding the bonehead moves that plagued past keepers in the series, although there were still times when my defenders and the manual player selection AI lacked such smarts.



Despite my excitement for what FIFA has going for it on the field, I was disappointed that Be a Pro mode is largely the same, and that improvements to the manager mode are only under the hood (such as more realistic transfers and simulated results). However, the game handles dribbling and other ball control mechanics well, and there is a definite energy on the pitch. Chemistry is an important aspect of any championship team – even more so if you're going to win The Double – and FIFA 10 brings its pieces together nicely. » **Matthew Kato**

Head online to check the list of every FIFA 10 skill move at www.gameinformer.com/mag

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Saw

"DO YOU WANT TO PLAY A GAME?" YES, A BETTER ONE

6

PS3 • 360 • PC

» **Concept**
Solve repetitive puzzles and fight brainless foes in a Saw-flavored setting

» **Graphics**
Slow loading textures, awkward animations, and generic character models mar a decent setting

» **Sound**
Hats off to Tobin Bell's Jigsaw voicework. He really knows how to tickle your spinal cord

» **Playability**
The combat is clueless, the traps get annoying, and the experience drags on. At least the puzzles are fun

» **Entertainment**
True fans of the movies may find something worthwhile here, but survival horror fans hungry for their next big scare should look elsewhere

» **Replay Value**
Low

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Konami **Developer** Zombie **Release** October 6 **ESRB** M

The Saw films are renowned for their ability to induce gut-wrenching reactions with vivid torture scenes and nail-biting suspense. Imagine my dismay when I popped in the game and instead felt boredom tempered with frustration. Developer Zombie has successfully transfused the grim atmosphere and aesthetic of the movies, but gallons of blood were lost during the procedure.

Saw's ridiculous story is wedged firmly between the first and second films. After detective David Tapp suffers a gunshot wound at the hands of Jigsaw's crony, he's transported to the serial killer's altered asylum, patched up, and tasked with enduring a gore-filled, puzzle-infested test. From the very start, Saw's plot is hog-tied and thrown in a trunk while gameplay takes the wheel.

Traversing the dark, booby-trapped rooms of the enormous asylum very unnerving. If you aren't careful to disarm shotgun traps and avoid trotting barefoot over broken glass, your time in the loony bin will be brief. It's startling the first few times an expertly placed shotgun blasts your head into a cloud of pink mist, but later in the game your inevitable missteps will test your patience.

Being the accommodating host he is, Jigsaw has populated the sanitarium with other victims. Most of these desperate souls are after the key that has been surgically implanted in your chest, rushing you with impromptu weapons like nail-bats in their fight for freedom. I dropped the slow melee weapons mere hours into the game, as the enemy AI is so weak that your foes cannot react properly to the good detective's mean right jabs. Saw's combat is a mess. Aiming a gun with the left trigger and firing by pressing a face button? That's torture.

The few asylum captives that aren't trying to kill you are your responsibility to rescue. This usually involves powering-down torture machines by arranging cog wheels, rewiring circuit boxes, and aligning gas pipes. Self-contained, the puzzles are simple and rewarding. The game attempts to enhance their difficulty by filling rooms with time bombs or poisonous gas, which only leads to frustrating checkpoint reloads.

In the end, Saw fails to deliver the suspenseful crescendos, surprising twists, and apprehensive atmosphere of the films. Instead, it's padded with unremarkable gore, poor pacing, and uninspired level design. This game suffers from the same chronic affliction as the milked film franchise – it wears out its welcome quickly and asks too much for the price of admission. » **Tim Turi**

Read our interview with Jigsaw actor Tobin Bell at www.gameinformer.com/mag

Uncharted 2: Among Thieves

THE ADVENTURE OF A LIFETIME

10

PS3

» **Concept**
The stakes are higher. The set pieces are larger. And the race to find Marco Polo's lost fleet is just the beginning of this astonishing adventure

» **Graphics**
Every object, texture, and beam of light harnesses a high level of realism

» **Sound**
Nolan North delivers his best performance. Claudia Black is also fantastic. The brilliantly orchestrated score accompanies the shifting tones of the story and action

» **Playability**
A thrill ride that corrects the problematic gunplay from the first game and expands the scope of the platforming

» **Entertainment**
Naughty Dog has honed in on the heart of adventure, creating a game that wraps you up in its storytelling, action, and array of multiplayer options

» **Replay Value**
High

Second Opinion 10

Uncharted 2: Among Thieves is a stunning, gorgeous adventure that will likely stand as the defining game of the PlayStation 3. Nearly every flaw of the original game has been corrected. The spotty gunplay is polished to a military shine, with accurate and smooth targeting. Platforming is more fluid, but at the same time more challenging due to the more complex level designs. But the real impact of this game comes from the story and characters. The gripping plot, snappy dialogue, and fantastic voice acting serve to create the most cinematic experience in gaming history. It's like playing a brilliant summer action movie, right down to the most memorable explosive set pieces you may ever see. I was also pleasantly surprised by the excellent multiplayer, which offers unique spins on both co-op and competitive online play. From beginning to end, Uncharted 2 is a masterpiece, and a new standard in the action genre. » **Matt Helgeson**

[illegible]

gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH   gameinformer PLATINUM

Style 1-Player Action (10-Player Online) **Publisher** Sony Computer Entertainment **Developer** Naughty Dog **Release** October 13 **ESRB** T

In Uncharted 2's opening sequence, Naughty Dog wastes no time throwing treasure hunter Nathan Drake into harm's way. Only this time, he isn't the bulletproof protagonist we knew from the first adventure. Beaten, bloodied, and left for dead, he's been humanized. The emotional timbre is engaging and powerful. Yet this opening sequence isn't a movie to watch with bated breath. It's gameplay, and you're controlling Nathan in a nearly unconscious state.

The divide separating video games and motion pictures is expansive, but moments like this one bring them closer together. I'm not saying games should be movies, or vice versa, but exploring characters in different conditions, emotional or physical, can open the doors for more dynamic storytelling and gameplay in games. Uncharted 2 is testament to this idea.

Many of these gameplay moments bleed directly out of the story breaks. With the notable elimination of loading screens and no discernable difference between the cutscene and gameplay graphics, I often found myself tapping the analog stick during a conversation or action sequence just to make sure I wasn't supposed to be playing. In some cases, I was supposed to be playing! Ditching load screens may seem like a trivial technical merit, but it greatly enhances the game's pacing, flow, and overall cinematic impact.

Without skipping a beat, this adventure rolls like a boulder chasing Indiana Jones, picking up momentum and bouncing unpredictably every step of the way. Naughty Dog's scribes penned a fascinating, tightly wound mystery centered on Marco Polo's lost fleet. The set pieces accompanying this tale deliver the sense of miraculous discovery, and are instrumental in evolving both the characters and gameplay. Nathan, who is voiced brilliantly by gaming vet Nolan North, turns in one of the most believable performances I've seen from a game character. His emotions are fully established, and his comic timing is spot on, often bringing about big laughs in stressful situations.

Not once did I feel that the plot was altered to fit the gameplay. This was one of my big complaints with the first game; it just didn't move naturally. In Uncharted 2, every aspect of the game is harmonized. The environments players traverse embody a higher level of realism, meaning you won't see man-made barriers positioned strategically for a gunfight in a lush jungle. Small touches like these remove predictability from the equation.

Rather than following the traditional sequel process of adding more components to the action, Naughty Dog instead chose to iterate upon the original mechanics. The gunplay is most improved, now offering smooth targeting, weapons that kick, and credible targets that don't fidget like they have full bladders. On top of this, diversity in the enemy types adds dimensions to battles. An armored trooper may send you to a vertical space to use heavy machinery, whereas a squadron of light troops may be best tackled through stealthy neck snaps. Moreover, the weapon selection is much more satisfying, and assigning grenades to a specific button removes any chance of players tussling with the weapon selection wheel more than the enemies. The battles end up delivering a satisfying blend of pop-and-shoot and run-and-gun tactics. No longer did I find myself wishing they would be over so I could reach another cliff to climb.

[illegible]

Platforming is Naughty Dog's unquestioned strength, and Uncharted 2's doesn't disappoint. Nathan's moveset remains largely unchanged, but Naughty Dog found ways to intensify the art of leaping. On one hand, the levels are better designed for vertical exploration; it's not like Tomb Raider where you have to piece together the path. The platforming is still as linear as can be, but the challenges are now larger in scope, and often accompanied by some kind of unforeseen dilemma – be it falling ledges, moving gears, or dangerous explosions. The platforming and gunplay are seamlessly united, often overlapping when you least expect.

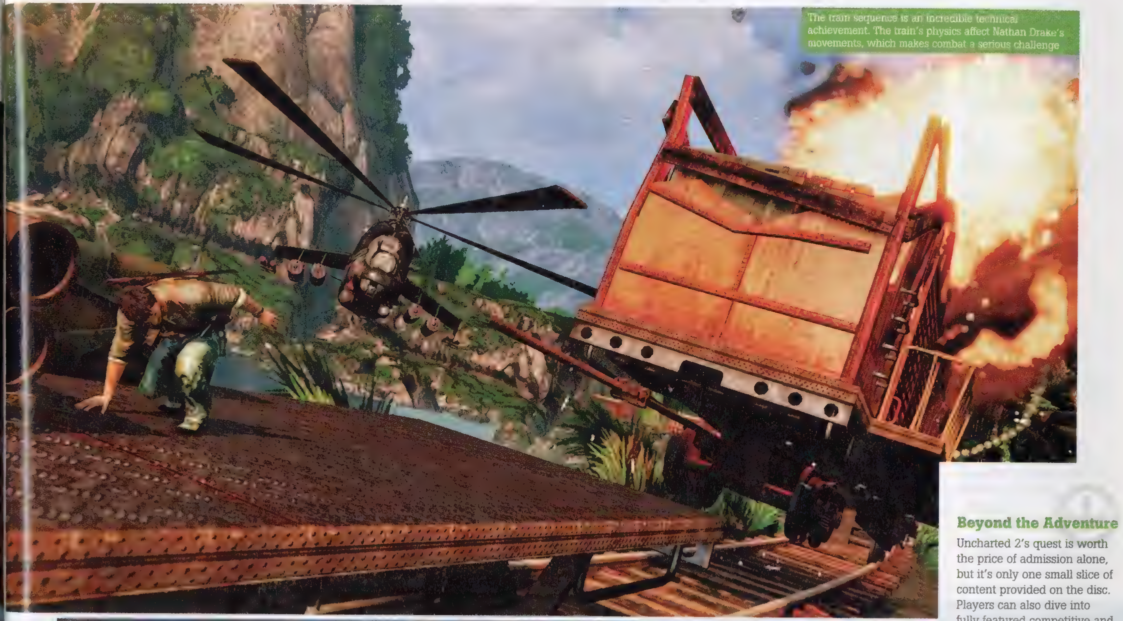
Nathan never jumps upon a jet ski, but several vehicles are used throughout the game. Trucks create one of the game's most memorable gunfights, and a train becomes the centerpiece to one of the most exciting levels I've seen in an action game.

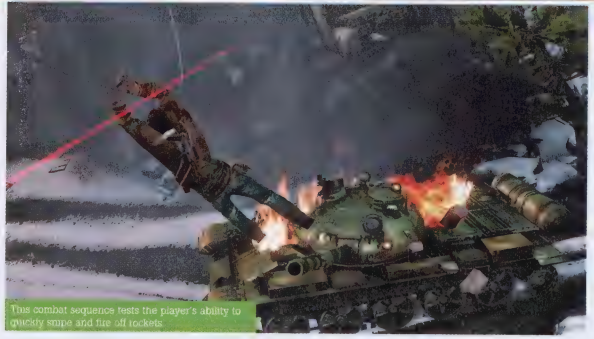
Naughty Dog's mastery over the PlayStation 3 hardware is evidenced most in Uncharted 2's visuals. A staggering level of realism is attained in both the characters and worlds. I couldn't find a texture with a blemish or an animation that looked goofy. I often found myself marveling at the smallest of details, like the way light bounces off rocks or how flags blow in the wind. With the action moving at a fevered pitch, it's hard to soak in all the details, but they are there, even in the far corners most people will likely never venture into.

Uncharted 2 is a masterstroke of game creation. This is the killer app PlayStation 3 owners have been waiting for, and I'd even be saying this without the outstanding competitive and co-op multiplayer (see sidebar). Given the complexity of the character relationships, I urge players to play the original game before venturing into the sequel. Some of the jokes and references fall flat if you don't have the knowledge of Nathan's previous exploits.

Uncharted 2 is a ringing testament to the power of both games and storytelling. It pulls you in, keeps you engaged, and concludes with a thunderous bang. » **Andrew Reiner**

View exclusive behind-the-scenes footage from the making of Uncharted 2 and watch the Naughty Dog staff wipe the floor with Game Informer editors using Uncharted's new Machinima mode at www.gameinformer.com/mag


The train sequence is an incredible technical achievement. The train's physics affect Nathan Drake's movements, which makes combat a serious challenge


This combat sequence tests the player's ability to quickly snipe and fire off rockets

Beyond the Adventure

Uncharted 2's quest is worth the price of admission alone, but it's only one small slice of content provided on the disc. Players can also dive into fully featured competitive and co-op modes. Competitive multiplayer supports up to 10 players, and offers a wide selection of satisfying match types. Like Call of Duty 4, player performances bring an array of rewards, such as perks (of which you can carry two into a match), ranks, and cash to exchange for new skins and gear. The solid gunplay from single-player transitions well into the multiplayer field. Grenade play is particularly impressive, and the maps embrace vertical gunplay. Pre-match loading is a bit extensive, but the action more than makes up for the wait.

If you don't enjoy shooting your friends, Uncharted 2 offers a deep and rewarding cooperative experience for up to three players. In addition to three standard co-op modes (which Naughty Dog has fleshed out with unique character banter and animations), teamwork skills are put to the test in the addictive Gold Rush and Survival modes. Cash earned can be used in the store for co-op only weapon upgrades.

If you are vain enough to watch how much ass you kick, Naughty Dog rounds out the multiplayer experience with a cinema mode.

Katamari Forever

FEW CHANGES IN KATAMARI'S PS3 PREMIERE

7.25

PS3

» Concept
Roll the katamari through familiar locales and new stages stocked with paraphernalia

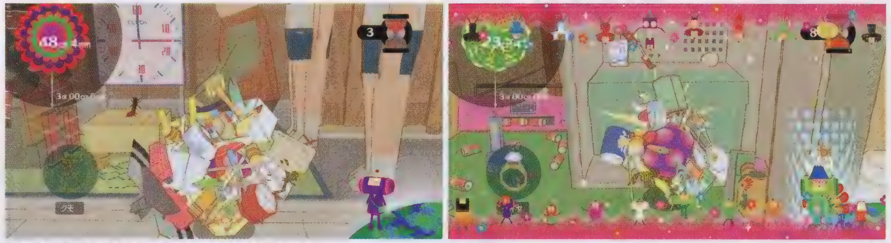
» Graphics
A beautiful new art style is presented in high def splendor

» Sound
The cutesy music of Katamari is in full effect, just as it should be

» Playability
Simple controls once you get a handle on the concept, but I got stuck on geometry too frequently

» Entertainment
This is familiar territory for longtime fans, but still strangely addictive

» Replay Value
Moderate



A new art style looks like high definition crayon art - different enough to be interesting without abandoning the old blocky shapes

Style 1 or 2-Player Action **Publisher** Namco Bandai Games **Developer** Namco Bandai Games **Release** September 22 **ESRB** E

Katamari Damacy deserved the accolades hailing its innovative gameplay and quirky humor when it first released as a budget title in 2004. The joy of sweeping up everything in your path with a giant sticky ball remains intact in the PS3 premiere, but the entire formula has lost its zany newness. Playing Katamari Forever, I couldn't shake the feeling that I was listening to a greatest hits album from a band that only ever had one great song.

The biggest change to Forever is a detailed art overhaul, abandoning the textureless visuals of previous games for a crayon-shaded world presented in full 1080p glory. It's a welcome change – if only the rest of the game had seen so much attention.

Half of Katamari's 30-some levels are stolen from previous games in the series. Conceptually, you're tackling these familiar stages to help fill in the King of All Cosmos' memory gaps after a bump to the head. In practice, it feels like an excuse to not make new content.The new (and more enjoyable) stages are presented through the introduction of the Robo King character. All of these fall under the "get this big in this amount of time" concept. Whether rolling through the Robo King's levels or helping the original King with his memory, the level scoring feels arbitrary, and the linear progression of levels is limiting. Even so, the mechanic behind it all is still fun and engaging.

The absurdity of the story and presentation has been ratcheted up yet again, but at this point I'm not sure I'm still getting the joke. Katamari Forever serves as a fine introduction to the concept for those who have yet to push the ball, but former Katamari addicts may find they've rolled down this road before. » **Matt Miller**

Check our our synopsis of the Katamari franchise history at www.gameinformer.com/mag

Ninja Gaiden Sigma 2

LADY NINJAS JOIN THIS WHOLESOME REMAKE

8.5

PS3

» Concept
Gaming's equivalent of a director's cut – except this director yanked out most of the blood

» Graphics
Stunning save for a few bland backgrounds

» Sound
Surprisingly decent English localization

» Playability
Combat is tight as long as it's not blocked by a fence or column

» Entertainment
Packed with excellent new content, including a throw-down with the Statue of Liberty

» Replay Value
Moderate

Style 1-Player Action (2-Player Online) **Publisher** Tecmo **Developer** Team Ninja **Release** September 29 **ESRB** M

Back in 1993, controversial arcade fighter Mortal Kombat released on home consoles. The SNES version replaced the gore with sweat, but was graphically superior to the bloody Sega Genesis port. Guess which one everybody liked? Ninja Gaiden Sigma 2 is the SNES version in this case, replacing spraying blood with blue smoke while adding co-op play, streamlining the gameplay, and introducing new chapters and characters. With all these great advances, why did Tecmo give bloodthirsty gamers an excuse to blow off this edition? It's still rated M, so what's really gained out of this decision?

While the dried pools of blood may disappoint some, Sigma 2 features many gameplay improvements. The bow and arrow has unlimited ammo so you no longer have to collect arrows, plus the streamlined controls make shooting way more appealing. It's nice not having to track down keys to open locked doors, and there's a nice path indicator you can bring up if you get lost. While it stinks that you're blocked from maxing your weapons completely until late in the game, at least you don't have to spend orbs on them anymore (you just choose one per level).

Rachel, Momiji, and Ayane's new chapters are a fun diversion from Ryu's quest and offer a chance to experiment with different play styles and alternate bosses. It is slightly lame, however, that these environments are mostly backward versions of Ryu's stages. The co-op mode is a large collection of plotless arena missions featuring waves of enemies and various boss compilations. Be sure to beat the main game before you delve into this mode or you won't have any weapons or bonus characters. Unfortunately, team play is online only; otherwise you're stuck with an AI bot.

Sigma 2 is a longer, more action-packed edition of Ninja Gaiden II, and if you've never played the original you won't notice the missing gore. » **Bryan Vore**

View more high-res screenshots of Ninja Gaiden Sigma 2 at www.gameinformer.com/mag

Second Opinion 8

While the first Sigma featured a drastic graphical improvement thanks to the console generation jump, Sigma 2 doesn't have the same immediately noticeable upgrade. Because it's not jumping generations, the changes are less about visuals and more about subtle improvements to the controls and inventory system. The method of aiming your projectile weapons is vastly improved, and the new characters and enemies add variety to the campaign. The decision to tone the gore down is confusing considering that the visceral kill animations were one of the most striking aspects of the original. Violence alone can't make a game good, but there are certain series that just don't feel right when it's taken down a notch (see MK vs DC). The notoriously spastic camera is still a hassle, and the story is as incoherent as ever, but Sigma 2 improves upon enough of the original to be worth checking out. » **Dan Ryckert**

Halo 3: ODST

ODST SUPPORTS A RISKY NEW CAMPAIGN WITH AN ABUNDANCE OF CLASSIC MULTIPLAYER ACTION

9.25

360

» Concept
Make an expansion pack that tells a new story in a different style – then sell it as a standalone title when you realize you made too much content

» Graphics
Sometimes ugly, sometimes breathtaking. The fact that all of your gameplay can be recorded, edited, and shared with your friends is pretty damn sweet

» Sound
The loud guns and louder explosions are topped only by Nathan Fillion's hilarious one-liners

» Playability
Halo's time-tested controls and forgiving aim assist mean you'll rack up more headshots than ever before

» Entertainment
Fans of Halo have plenty to love

» Replay Value
High

Style 1-Player Shooter (16-Player Online) **Publisher** Microsoft Game Studios **Developer** Bungie **Release** September 22 **ESRB** M

Though I enjoyed Halo 3: ODST, my praise comes with a few caveats. On one hand, the campaign is shorter than Halo fans are used to, and considerably smaller in scale. Instead of fighting to save the world as Master Chief, you play a nameless rookie just trying to reconnect with his squad. Series veterans have already seen most of the enemies and weapons they will encounter in the game, and some of the graphics – especially the faces of your human allies – look considerably outdated.

On the other hand, I can't get enough of the game. Even after two marathon sessions totaling more than 20 hours of play, I was ready to jump right into another match. Although it might disappoint some, the limited scope of the plot also meant that I knew what the hell was going on for once, and the use of nonlinear flashbacks makes the storyline mysterious and intriguing. The fugly characters you'll come across are quickly forgotten in light of the countless explosions you'll see (and cause) throughout the game, each scattering vehicle fragments, enemies, and the occasional ally through the streets of New Mombasa.

ODST fixes a few of the problems plaguing the series since its inception. Players finally have a map of their surroundings, complete with clearly marked objectives and the ability to place your own waypoints. Backtracking, an irritating, consistent staple of the franchise, takes place primarily in the open-city sections of the game, giving you the ability to pick different routes through buildings and side streets even if your destination is somewhere you've already been. As for not playing as Master Chief? After getting used to the smaller jump and not having a shield (don't worry, your character's "stamina" works in much the same way), I didn't miss the big guy one bit; my new sense of mortality only made my victories over enemy squads that much sweeter.

For most players, the single-player campaign will serve as a warm-up to ODST's plethora of multiplayer offerings. The second, multiplayer-only disc is packed with value, sporting 24 maps, the full functionality of Halo 3's Forge and Theater modes, and an insane amount of player stats chronicled on Bungie.net.

Even if you're not a fan of Halo's competitive multiplayer, the new Firefight mode is a refreshingly different experience for the series, delivering hours of fun in its own right. The mode takes the four-players-against-the-world co-op formula that's so popular nowadays and injects it with the franchise's top tier A.I. Instead of facing off against rounds of mindless cannon fodder (Gears of War 2) or undead enemies that run *toward* your explosives (Left 4 Dead), your opponents in Firefight mode are formidable and dangerously clever – even the lowliest grunt can be deadly when he starts whipping plasma grenades. Halo's battlefields haven't felt this intense and chaotic since the original game debuted in 2001. In just a dozen or so hours of play, Firefight mode delivered my most enjoyable experiences with the series to date.

Ultimately, Bungie's newest adventure won't sway those who have already made up their minds about the series; Halo haters will dismiss ODST as more of the same, while diehard fans will proclaim it the greatest thing since – well, Halo 3. Someplace in the middle is where ODST will make its biggest impact. If, like me, you've found yourself slowly falling out of love with Halo over the years, ODST provides a fresh, exciting experience that rekindles your interest in this seminal sci-fi shooter. » **Jeff Marchiafava**

For tips on how to boost your Firefight mode score and to see where you rank amongst the GI crew, head to www.gameinformer.com/mag

A Full-Fledged Sequel?

ODST started out as Halo 3: Recon, an expansion pack for Halo 3. So, how much content does the game really pack?

Campaign: An average run-through will take you 8-9 hours. Unlockables that piece together a radio drama (think BioShock's audio diaries) and reveal the mystery behind the Covenant's interest in New Mombasa will have you scouring the city for extra hours, and four-player co-op is a different enough experience to warrant a second or third return trip.

Competitive Multiplayer: ODST offers maps galore – a second disc dedicated to multiplayer offers every Halo 3 map available to date, plus three new ones. An in-depth ranking system and the ability to tweak maps before or during matches with friends should keep fans occupied for a long time to come.

Firefight Mode: While four players against endless waves of enemies may sound like a rip-off of other FPS games, the intricate scoring system, loads of randomized variables, and nonstop action make it the front-runner among ODST's modes.

Forza Motorsport 3

TURN 10'S NEW RACER GOES ROUND AND ROUND

8.5

360

» Concept
Like a brand-new car, Forza 3 exudes sexiness and sparkling excitement but drives about the same

» Graphics
Although the photo-realistic backgrounds look good, the cockpit textures are plain, and pop-up haunts horizon objects and car shadows

» Sound
If you think that Gran Turismo has a lock on all the smooth jazz and anonymous music you could handle, I'm sorry to say that you're wrong

» Playability
I have no idea why in some cars' cockpit view half your rear-view mirror is chopped off by the edge of the screen. Weird

» Entertainment
Forza 3 gets more accessible, but not necessarily more fun

» Replay Value
High

gameinformer SILVER

Style 1 or 2-Player Racing (8-Player Online) **Publisher** Microsoft Game Studios **Developer** Turn 10 Studios **Release** October 27 **ESRB** E

Our romance with fast cars is all about feeling that spike of adrenaline as your speed increases, pushing you into a different physical plane. In a slightly more abstract sense, it's about flying off to see new sights and escaping to new experiences. Video games aren't that different. You're still on the edge of your seat, driving by the seat of your pants, only you're far more safe from danger than you would be if you were actually strapped into a 400-mph death trap. You also want to feel like all that driving is taking you somewhere.

The Forza series' progression of rewards has always been one of its strong suits. The driver and car XP levels see to this. Win a couple races and not only does your driver get a new car, but shops give you a discount on parts. Add in the fact that the credit system is generous (even after you subtract some for repairs to offset the damage to your car), and Forza avoids becoming a grind like other sim racers. Turn 10 Studios also redid its menu system to make everything more visually inviting, and added a calendar to keep track of the racing events. These tweaks are small changes that greatly help the game's pacing and show a vast improvement from Forza 2. One tiny criticism I have regarding the calendar system, however, is that the trio of events the game suggests for you aren't your only options. To see everything you have at your disposal, you must back out of the season play menu and hit up the events list to check out all the races available. In general, you'll go through your usual mix of multi-race series, manufacturer- or spec-specific events, drag races, and some killer marathons courtesy of Le Mans and Nürburgring. Needless to say about the Forza series, the driving is still tight.

The game's calendar and progression system make the game very inviting, but I think the game misses a little by being – in some ways – too easy. What's the point of rating races and cars by their performance level if there are numerous times that you can race a superior car in a lower event for an easy win? The automatic upgrades are great, but take away from actually buying those parts. Remember the cool discounts you won from manufacturers? I never went into a parts store because it was all automatically done for me. It's hard to scoff at the accessibility, but in a sense, is the game working against itself? Add in the fact that rewinds are unlimited (I wish they were limited or you got fewer credits for using them), and Forza 3 trades letting you see everything it has to offer for a payoff that doesn't feel as big.

I ate up everything Forza 3 had to offer. I raced hard through the streets of Italy's coastal town Amalfi, taking in the game's gorgeous sights and pushing the laws of physics around every tight turn. I spent lots of time in the garage adding layer upon layer to my cars' custom graphics with the game's easy-to-use tools. At the end of it all, however, I didn't feel like I was light years ahead of any other game in the Forza series. Forza 3 redefines the franchise, but it definitely didn't take me to anywhere I hadn't already been before. » **Matthew Kato**

Want a free GI car in Forza 3? Head to www.gameinformer.com/mag for details

The Year of Living Dangerously

Here are some the goodies we won for certain milestones in our first calendar year in Forza 3's career system, which encompassed 15 events, 64.45 miles driven, and 148,487 credits earned. What does that buy you? With 148,487 credits early in the game, I was already able to buy a class-A 1999 Ferrari 360 Modena.

Driver Level 2: 2009 Alfa Romeo Brera Italia Independent

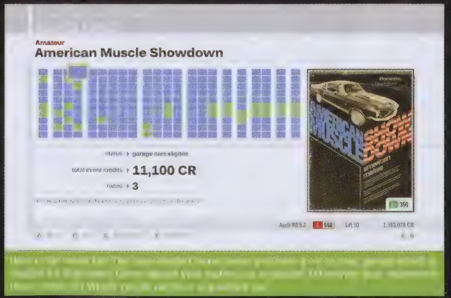
Driver Level 3: 2009 Volkswagen Scirocco GT

Alfa Romeo at Level 2: Ten percent discount on air filter upgrades by Green Filter Italy for Alfa Romeo, FIAT, Lancia, and Maserati

2004 Honda Mugen Civic Type-R at Level 2: Ten percent discount on fuel system upgrades by AEM for Acura, Honda, Lexus, and more

Driver Level 4: 2003 Renault Sport Clio V6

Driver Level 5: 2009 Ford Focus RS



Amateur
American Muscle Showdown
status ▸ garage cars eligible
total event credits ▸ 11,100 CR
races ▸ 3

Second Opinion 9

Just when I thought I was getting sick of hardcore sim racers, along comes Forza 3. Microsoft's big-budget series just keeps on adding content, and the game now spans two discs. There's well over 60 hours of career here alone. I definitely like the fact that it doesn't take forever to get my hands on something mean and fast. The tracks that host these automobiles also shine with gorgeous graphics and great replay value. The addition of modes like drift and drag, and the new career structure, helps cure the boring old racing formula that nearly all sims suffer from. The social aspect that comes with Forza titles is impressive even today. Video recording and custom car auctions are just some of the many ways players can share content with each other over Xbox Live. While the game lacks a bit of the edge-of-your-seat feeling that I would have liked, it's easily one of the best racing sims I've ever played. » **Nick Ahrens**

Blazing Spear
Over Drive
Movement Mode
Blazing Spear 2
Fire Tap
Attack

Magnacarta 2

SLOW STORY AND A FAST-PACED, ADDICTIVE BATTLE SYSTEM

Style 1-Player Role-Playing Game **Publisher** Namco Bandai **Developer** Softmax
Release October 13 **ESRB** T

8.25

360

» Concept
Traditional RPG elements with an intricate battle system and top-heavy female characters

» Graphics
Beautiful character design powered by Unreal Engine 3. Environments, though attractive, are linear and repetitive

» Sound
Fully voiced dialogue is passable. Vast improvement over Tears of Blood

» Playability
Battles are intuitive and addicting. Awkward camera angles often hinder combat

» Entertainment
Plenty of battles, side quests, and customizable weapons available to retain interest for 40-plus hours of gameplay

» Replay Value
Moderate

In Magnacarta 2, Korean developer Softmax introduces players to the war-torn continent of Lanzheim, where a conflict between northern and southern forces spreads violence kingdom-wide. The game has a plot entirely unrelated to its predecessor, Magna Carta: Tears of Blood, and a revamped battle system that will keep you on your toes.

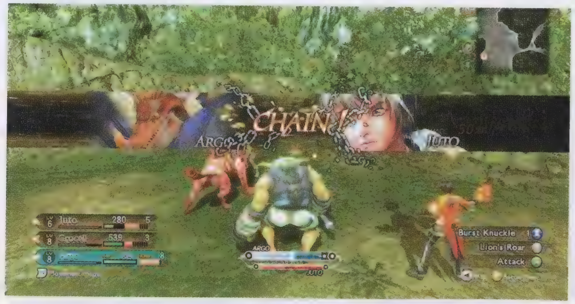
The story follows Juto, a midriff-bearing warrior with no memory of his past, and Zephie, a sweet but powerful princess, as they battle alongside a group of characters fighting for their convictions. Though the plot takes a few interesting turns, it's nothing we haven't already seen.

The intricate, real-time battle system is where Magnacarta 2 shines. Each battle requires a degree of strategy mixing both standard attacks and special skills earned through customizable weapons. No two battles are ever fought the same way keeping each encounter fresh. You can toggle between characters on the fly, and if timed correctly you'll start a chain between characters, which unleashes devastating attacks and keeps combat moving at a fast pace. Keep in mind, this is no button masher. Constantly hitting the A button to attack causes the active character to "Overheat," immobilizing him or her until the Overheat gauge diminishes. More than one party member in Overheat mode could spell trouble. This is annoying and can be difficult to avoid in the heat of combat without practice. Battle tutorials continue even after 20 hours of gameplay to add new moves to your arsenal, so there is plenty to keep you locked in until mastered.

Awkward camera angles and occasional AI issues make keeping track of non-active party members a challenge. You'll switch to a party member and find they strayed away from the action and became trapped behind an object on the field. In large-scale battles this not only slows down action, but can also lead to defeat. Thankfully, this didn't occur often enough to derail the combat experience.

With classic role-playing elements and addictive combat mechanics, Magnacarta 2 is a solid game for RPG veterans looking for a new challenge. » **Annette Gonzalez**

Visit www.gameinformer.com/mag to check out additional art, screenshots, and gameplay footage of Magnacarta 2.



Start a chain between characters to deliver devastating attacks

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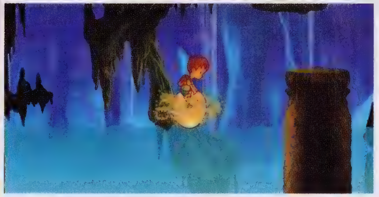
A Boy and His Blob

A STYLISH REBIRTH FOR THE NES CULT CLASSIC



8

Wii

» Concept
Reimagine the classic title, taking steps to avoid the pitfalls of its predecessor

» Graphics
The hand-drawn and animated graphics shine. You won't get tired of looking at the beautifully designed and diverse environments

» Sound
Cheery and uplifting – a perfect fit for the atmosphere of the game

» Playability
A deceptively simple concept masks challenging and sometimes frustrating gameplay

» Entertainment
Charming and innovative, but expect to walk away exasperated a handful of times

» Replay Value
Moderate

Style 1-Player Puzzle/Platforming **Publisher** Majesco **Developer** WayForward Technologies **Release** October 13 **ESRB** E

It's easy to let nostalgia for the property – or for 2D side-scrolling platformers – blind you while playing A Boy and His Blob. The reimagining of the 1989 NES title had throngs of gamers aflutter upon announcement, conjuring memories of a game shrouded by time and the mask of childhood. Having finished the hefty remake, I can safely say that fans and newcomers alike will be impressed. But like its predecessor, A Boy and His Blob isn't without its frustrations.

The key elements of the classic version have been left untouched; the new iteration is primarily an avenue for higher production values. Twenty years later the boy and his newfound friend are still working their way across the universe to save blob-kind. No other story elements or plot points are needed; after the pair's initial encounter, the ingenious gameplay takes center stage. Blob can change into 15 unique objects by eating aptly named jelly beans. Some of them become mainstays, such as the Licorice Ladder or the Tangerine Trampoline. Others offer a breath of fresh air, completely changing the way you approach platforming.

WayForward did a fantastic job easing players into the ever-evolving skill set, using signs and simple introductory scenarios to challenge the player and force them to shake up their problem-solving arsenal. In earlier levels, water is a deadly obstacle for the boy. After obtaining the Bubble Gum Bouncer, water no longer poses a threat and new doors open to you. Still, levels are designed to continually challenge; once water is no longer a problem, new obstacles await. Blob has more, increasingly interesting forms that I won't spoil for you, and each feels more of a treat than the last. Nothing stays simple for too long.

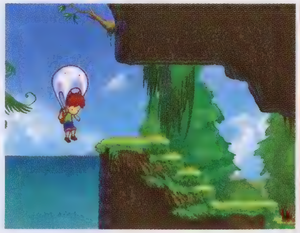
You'll have plenty of time to master these new skills (or die trying) because the game offers a massive amount of content, spanning 40 levels. To top things off, each level also harbors three treasure chests, and nabbing them all will net you access to a challenge level. Find all the hidden chests in the game and you effectively double your playtime. That's a lot of bang for your buck.

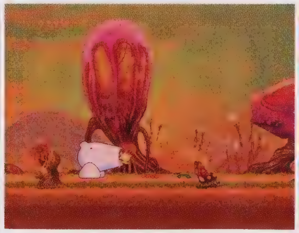
Sadly, the stunning graphics, charming music, and endearing characters don't mask the game's faults. While the puzzles are nothing short of ingenious, you are always one treacherous step away from infuriation. I have no qualms about being stumped from time to time. The issue is when that eureka moment finally comes, progression can be halted by a series of obstacles that require perfectly timed jumps with even more exact trajectories. At times it takes dozens of attempts to string together a combo of moves to make it across an extremely short expanse. With a very forgiving save system, this doesn't often become an issue, but in several particularly challenging areas with falling platforms and walls lined with floating mines, the frustration was nearly game-ending. The twitchy controls, particularly when flying, compound the problem. After 15 or 20 minutes of repeating a 10-second string of actions, all I could do was step away and put the game down for another time and disposition. A clear mind and calm hand is needed at all times.

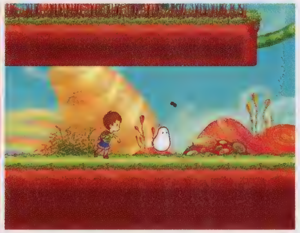
Despite these problems, there is something undeniably magnetic about the game. The lush environments, charming characters, and the infinite power of the hug button make it impossible to stay upset for too long. Like its namesake predecessor, a couple of days after setting the controller down, it's hard not to look back on A Boy and His Blob and smile. » **Meagan VanBurkleo**

Second Opinion 8.75

I never played the original game, but it doesn't matter one bit. From the moment I started playing A Boy and His Blob I was taken in by the slick animation, adorable characters, and clever level design. The basic mechanic of feeding jellybeans to a blob to transform it into a constantly expanding variety of objects results in a smooth stream of engaging platform puzzles. Riding a rocket through spike-filled tunnels or parachuting down a deadly pit mixes in fast-paced action, keeping things fresh. The boss battles are great David vs. Goliath matchups, focusing on wits over combat prowess. Hardcore players may scoff at the liberal checkpoints and infinite lives, but they'll relish finding hidden treasure chests and beating the 40 taxing challenge levels. Definitely play this one all the way to the end. You're in for some awesome surprises. » **Bryan Vore**







Spore Hero

NEITHER REVOLUTION NOR EVOLUTION

Style 1-Player Action (2-Player Local) **Publisher** Electronic Arts
Developer Electronic Arts **Release** October 6 **ESRB** E10+

7

Wii

» Concept
Will Wright's epic mates with a childish adventure game

» Graphics
Stylized and goofy, the look works well on the Wii

» Sound
Repetitive tunes and gibberish dialogue overload cute sensors

» Playability
Frustrating combat, but if you've played a platformer, you'll get it

» Entertainment
Exploring and questing are a blast. Minigames, not so much

» Replay Value
Moderately low

Will Wright's Spore, which arrived last year on PC after years of anticipation, has earned one adjective above all else: ambitious. Whatever your opinions on the final release, the genre-spanning, era-hopping title was one of the most amazingly realized explorations of a single topic in video game form ever. The topic in question? Evolution.

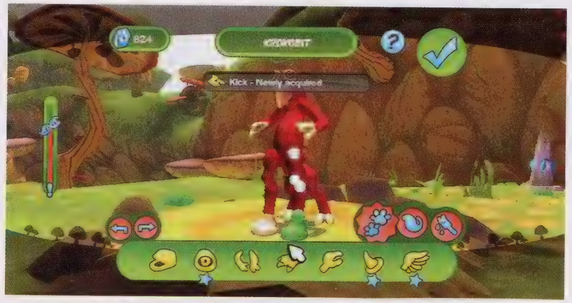
EA's new Wii spin-off of the franchise, Spore Hero, has a decidedly scaled-back scope. Instead of melding several different genres into a galaxy-wide journey to the top of the food chain, Spore Hero sticks to a single planet and the well-tested 3D platforming and questing normally found in Mario or Zelda games.

As far as gameplay goes, Maxis seems to know its audience quite well, and they do a suitable job of emulating the successes of other popular Wii releases. You crash-land on a planet and begin by choosing body parts for your adolescent hero. As you evolve your creature and complete quests for the planet's natives, you uncover new body parts and unlock new skills that will allow you to reach more areas and run more quests. It's carrot-on-a-stick design philosophy at its simplest, and it works.

What's disappointing, though, is how much this setup ignores the original appeal of Spore. You're no longer designing and evolving your own special form of life, because the body parts have stats that must be upgraded to progress. Does the creature you've imagined in your head have fins instead of wings? Doesn't matter, because you need to make room for both in order to finish the single-player adventure. Inevitably, you'll want to upgrade to level two swimming and flying, limiting the options on body parts even more.

I should stress that Spore is an enjoyable (if slightly short) Zelda-lite adventure. However, the creation and evolution aspects – major parts of what made the original game so impressive – have taken a back seat to a run-of-the-mill equipment upgrade grind with some minor aesthetic variations. Spore Hero is a fun game; it's just not necessarily a Spore game. » **Phil Kollar**

Watch a video of Spore Hero's character creator in action at www.gameinformer.com/mag



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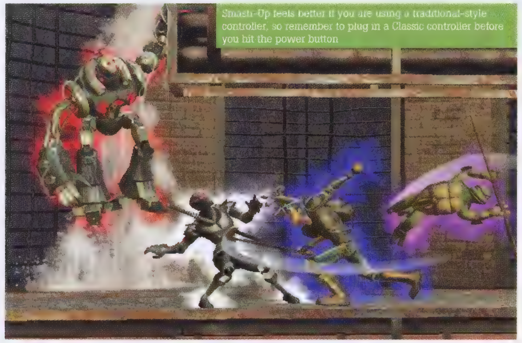
Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Smash-Up

THOUGH DERIVATIVE, IT'S A SHELL OF A GOOD TIME FOR FANS


Smash-Up feels better if you are using a traditional-style controller, so remember to plug in a Classic controller before you hit the power button

7.75

Style 1 to 4-Player Fighting (4-Player Online) **Publisher** Ubisoft **Developer** Game Arts **Release** September 22 **ESRB** E10+

Wii

» Concept
America's favorite reptilian ninjas settle their grievances Smash Bros. style

» Graphics
The original comic was drawn in black and white with a pencil, and it was still more fun to look at than these comic-esque cutscenes. Thankfully the in-game graphics look great.

» Sound
It's fun to hear most of the original '90s cartoon cast reprise their roles, but the music is rather unremarkable

» Playability
The loose controls take some getting used to, but when used expertly dodges are extremely effective

» Entertainment
It's fun to watch the layout of each level change throughout the course of the fight

» Replay Value
Moderately high

At first glance Smash-Up has a lot in common with the original Turtles comic book – it's goofy enough to be laughable, yet it's charismatic. Both clearly ape other properties (X-Men and Daredevil for the comic, Smash Bros. for the game), and both have production values so low they look like they were created in someone's garage. For an independent comic published in the early '80s this is understandable, but for a video game based on a 25-year-old multi-million dollar franchise you have to wonder why the menu system looks like it was made using MS Paint.

Comparisons to Smash Bros. are inevitable – even the title references Nintendo's brawler. Hoping to please its fans, this team of ex-Smash Bros. developers sticks to the formula of wicked-fast four-player action, two-button controls, and crazy level design. Smash-Up's inventive and evolving levels are the game's most noteworthy trait. In one area you fight over a runaway train, ducking under tunnels as the scenery blazes by at 90 mph. In another, you wrestle above a waterfall until the decaying log you're standing on gives way, sending you and your foes into rocky, crocodile-infested waters.

Unfortunately, you can only squeeze so much variety out of a two-button control scheme, and the movements are so floaty you feel like you're controlling a bunch of teenage mutant feathers. Power pickups – which allow you to throw ninja stars or electrify your enemies – range from useful to unfairly useful (surrounding yourself with a mini tornado can turn the tide fairly quickly). The roster starts out thin, but you can eventually unlock 16 playable characters, including Ubisoft's famously demented Rabbids.

If the Smash Bros. formula has worn thin for you, the Smash-Up experience will feel as sturdy as a wet paper towel. On the other hand, Smash Bros. and TMNT fans should embrace this game's dodge-happy action. » **Ben Reeves**

Ju-On: The Grudge

LAME SCARES AND PLODDING GAMEPLAY RENEW YOUR FEAR OF THE DARK

High five?

3

Style 1 or 2-Player Adventure **Publisher** Xseed Games **Developer** FeelPlus **Release** October 27 **ESRB** M

Wii

» Concept
Celebrate The Grudge's 10th anniversary by stumbling in the dark

» Graphics
It's tough to look scary when your polygons are hanging out

» Sound
Makes the original Resident Evil's soundtrack sound like Mozart

» Playability
Try to aim a possessed flashlight while steering a blundering tank

» Entertainment
No amount of random scares or shoddy lighting can compensate for The Grudge's unplayable controls or horrendous aesthetics. Just let the flashlight die

» Replay Value
Low

All who are touched by the curse shall die. These are the foreboding words with which Ju-On: The Grudge attempts to simultaneously frighten and entice participants of the haunted house simulator. Little did I know when picking up the Wii remote that I would actually die of boredom. This Japanese horror game is more watered down than one of the genre's American remakes.

The dubious story of Ju-On focuses on the cursed Yamada family. Each doomed protagonist's tale is played out through individual episodes, beginning with the daughter of the family chasing her dog into a derelict warehouse. Other family members travel to abandoned apartments, a haunted hospital, a freaky fashion school, and one very familiar household. Each locale features the meowing little boy and long-haired ghoul gal from the films, recycled ad nauseum.

The game starts off utilizing moody, real-life footage to set the dreary tone. The anxiety-inspiring atmosphere begins to falter in-game, with the liberal use of pitch blackness and a barely passable lighting system. The scariest sights you'll shine your flashlight upon are the rough, unpolished environments.

Controlling the various curse victims is performed with a single Wii remote mimicking a flashlight. You aim the beacon with the finesse of a post-traumatic stress victim as you steer and move your character at an impossibly slow pace in the first person. Apparently the Yamada family suffers from a hereditary condition where you have turtles instead of feet. During The Grudge's prompted, finicky evasion encounters, you'll run for your life, hide in closets, fight hair-tentacle monsters, and fend off stray cats by waggling the controller. These quicktime events crank up the challenge later in the game, but distinguishing between whether an indicator arrow requests a forward thrust versus an upward waggle can be frustrating.

Ju-On: The Grudge fails to inspire terror, relying on tired jump-scares, that over-used croaking sound, and random, cheesy scares via a second controller. When horror movies suck, at least they only last an hour and a half. This spans an agonizing seven plus hours. This game deserves no more attention than a double-digit horror movie sequel laying in the $1.99 VHS bin. » **Tim Turi**

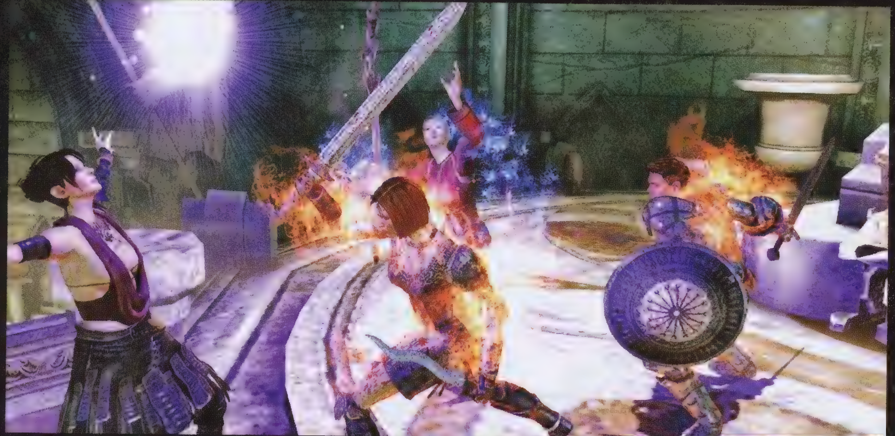
Are the Wii and horror games a match made in hell? Head to www.gameinformer.com/mag to find out

Second Opinion 4

Ju-On: The Grudge immediately replaced my fears of its creepy raven-haired girl with frustration over its haunted Wii remote controls. While exploring stereotypical horror environments, you encounter the demon girl and her meowing male counterpart from the films, which is the only time any action occurs. You must swing the unforgivingly unresponsive remote in the direction of onscreen arrows, but its inaccuracy causes you to restart the entire episode if you fail. These encounters are few and far between, leaving you to wander and gaze at PS2-quality graphics. The Grudge had so much potential to creep the hell out of people and failed at every dark turn. » **Annette Gonzalez**

Dragon Age: Origins

BIOWARE'S RETURN TO CLASSIC FORM DOES NOT DISAPPOINT



Style 1-Player Role-Playing Game **Publisher** Electronic Arts **Developer** BioWare **Release** November 3 **ESRB** M

gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH
gameinformer GOLD

9

PC

» Concept
A masterful return to the sub-genre that gave BioWare its beginning

» Graphics
The visuals are impressive, though not exactly top-of-the-line. The artistic design conveys the ancient fantasy setting well

» Sound
Lots of quality voice acting and an atmospheric soundtrack. Thankfully, none of the crappy metal from the trailers made the final cut

» Playability
Fussy camera angles can slow you down in battle, and inventory management is a minor pain. Otherwise, the interface works incredibly well

» Entertainment
I want to play this game again right now

» Replay Value
High

Before BioWare amassed a following among console gamers with games like Knights of the Old Republic, Jade Empire, and Mass Effect, the developer already had a significant fanbase. These gamers loved the studio for its work on the PC series Baldur's Gate and Neverwinter Nights – tactical, story-driven RPGs with an emphasis on party mechanics. No developer did that style of game better in those days, and Dragon Age: Origins proves that BioWare isn't giving up the crown. Dragon Age brilliantly combines the genre's old-school conventions with a few modern twists to create one of the most addictive and expansive RPGs of its kind.

Attempting to summarize the experience of Dragon Age in a few paragraphs is almost ridiculous given the depth of the game's content. Six distinct openings depending on your character (each lasting a couple hours), cool specializations for each class, plenty of tactical variety, and a vast array of sidequests keep you immersed in the world as time flies by. The central narrative arc and the characters involved serve the setting well, but don't deviate far from expectations. On the other hand, the subplots have some great hooks that I won't spoil here – though I will say that the mages' tower is awesome. A speed demon could blow through the main story in 40 hours, but thorough players can expect about 70.

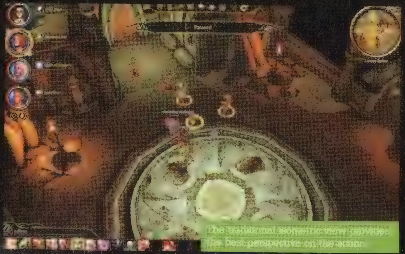
While some time is spent exploring and conversing, the biggest thrills in Dragon Age are found in combat. This is no breezy hack 'n slash affair; the best encounters feel like puzzles, forcing you to use your resources wisely and make calculated decisions on the path to victory. Which enemy poses the largest threat? How do you stem the tide of oncoming skeletons? Can your tank stand in the middle of your mage's electrical storm long enough to take down the ogre? Your answers to these questions change depending on your party members and their skills, leaving some space for experimentation. Almost every fight can kill you if you aren't focused, but the satisfaction of standing in the midst of your slaughtered foes after a well-fought battle makes it all worthwhile.

Even with a wealth of tactical options and party combinations, you'll rarely get bogged down thanks to the excellent ally AI system. Fans of Final Fantasy XII's gambits will feel right at home with the concept, which allows you to manage and prioritize your party's actions based on battle conditions. You can micromanage your spellcasters with a pause-and-play approach and leave your fighters on autopilot, which keeps combat flowing smoothly without sacrificing its sharp tactical edge.

In addition to capturing the joy of battle, Dragon Age also provides an engrossing backdrop for the action. Even more than Mass Effect, the nation of Ferelden feels like a fully realized setting with its own history, conflicts, and power groups. This is one of the main reasons the game is so addicting; completing quests isn't just about grinding experience and amassing loot – it actually feels like you have an impact on the world.

In the middle of reviewing Dragon Age, I had a couple vacation days scheduled. During my long out-of-state weekend, the game was constantly popping into my mind – how I could have won a fight differently, or how I might spend my next few talent points. As soon as my flight landed back in Minneapolis, I didn't even fight the urge; I drove straight into the office and spent an entire Sunday night in front of the computer fighting darkspawn and saving Ferelden. The number of titles that can foster this level of dedication and obsession are few, and Dragon Age: Origins is among the best of them. » **Joe Juba**

Watch trailers for all six origin stories at www.gameinformer.com/mag


The traditional isometric view provides the best perspective on the action

No Console Versions?

Due to circumstances beyond our control, we were unable to obtain reviewable copies of Dragon Age: Origins for Xbox 360 and PS3. When we have the console versions, we will evaluate them and review them separately if they display substantial differences. Otherwise, consider this our definitive review.

Devil's Advocate

The "Other" Perspective

Despite my love of Dragon Age, certain issues will make it less appealing to some players. Your mute main character doesn't have much personality, and your relationship with each party member is represented by a standard love/hate meter that doesn't convey any natural sense of bonding. The lack of any permanent item storage means that you're carting all of your loot – crafting reagents included – around in your limited inventory at all times. Even the reward system is occasionally out of sync; several major quest rewards were significantly worse than the equipment I had been using for hours. While these are all problems, they don't significantly disrupt the interactions between all of the things Dragon Age does right.

Tropico 3

HEAD BACK TO THE ISLAND IN THIS QUALITY DICTATOR SIM

8.75

PC

» **Concept**
Guide a Caribbean island to prosperity as the duly elected Presidente

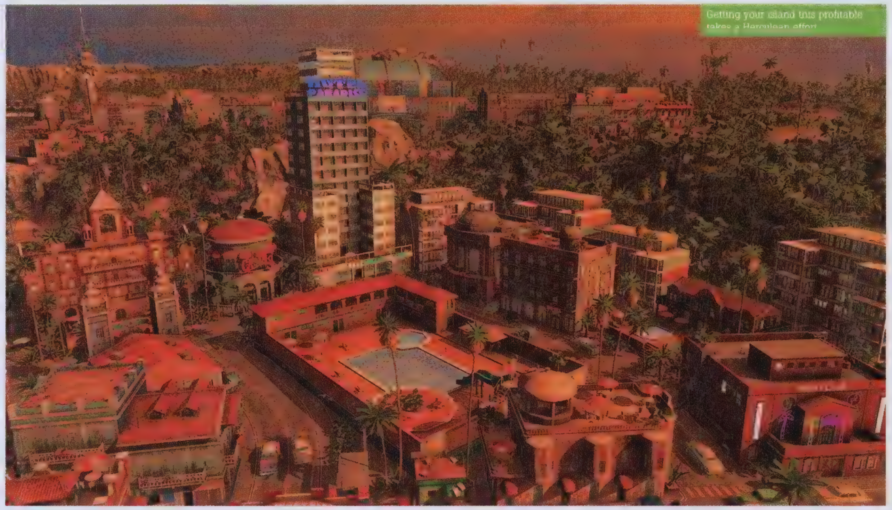
» **Graphics**
The best use of depth-of-field I've seen to date rounds out Tropico's excellent visuals

» **Sound**
The voiced radio blasts that accompany events as they unfold are great...until you've heard the exact same message 15 times

» **Playability**
You can go into the minutae of your citizens' lives if you wish, but it's also very easy to play this at a high level as a more hands-off simulation

» **Entertainment**
The Caribbean in the mid-20th century is an unusual setting for a city builder, but Tropico 3 uses its setting to project charm to go along with its excellent gameplay

» **Replay Value**
High



Getting your island this profitable takes a Herculean effort

gameinformer SILVER

Style 1-Player Simulation **Publisher** Kalypso Media **Developer** Haemimont Games **Release** October 20 **ESRB** T

I'm sure there's some selection bias at work here, but I can't help but think that Europe stepped up over the last year in triple-A game development. Tropico 3 is the latest in a string of great titles coming from across the pond. This city simulator leverages incredibly detailed political and economic models to create engaging gameplay while simultaneously providing a terrific sense of place with its outstanding presentation. A steep learning curve, limited tutorial, and poor documentation set a high barrier to entry – which is well worth overcoming in order to experience what Tropico 3 has to offer.

Unlike many city sims, this doesn't worry the player overmuch about creating complex housing districts with access to a set of goods and services in order to get your citizens to build better, more lucrative dwellings. Tropico concerns you with building an infrastructure that allows your subjects to get on with their lives without too much fuss. If you supply them with jobs and the rudimentary services they need and/or want, they'll go about their business while you worry about how best to spend their tax dollars. Building the bones of a prosperous society is an entertaining puzzle in itself, but that's only a single gameplay vector.

Ruling Tropico requires making a number of big-picture decisions: what kind of crops to grow, whether to hire trained foreign workers for specialist jobs or rely on immigration, and the appropriate level of kowtowing to U.S. and U.S.S.R. interests are just a few examples. A whole slate of edicts that range from mandatory education to requiring special building permits (which naturally funnel into your personal Swiss bank account) are at your disposal. Shaping domestic and foreign policy via these and other measures is critical to maintaining a stable state. Internal factions like communists, intellectuals, and religious folks get restive when their interests aren't catered to, and gross neglect of your peoples' desires will eventually lead to armed rebellion. It's a good thing you thought ahead and kept your generals happy and guard posts equipped, right?

The depth and breadth of your options and the systems that they impact goes far beyond these simple examples. A well-funded secret police force can identify and make troublemakers "disappear" before talk of revolution gets out of hand. Different crops grow best in certain conditions, and support different types of industry. Increasing workers' wages and improving their working conditions can be a great tool for maintaining order and attracting talent, but comes with a stiff price tag. If you want, you can even jump into direct control of your avatar and walk among the people, put down rebellions firsthand, and give inspiring speeches from the palace balcony.

This wondrous complexity is not introduced to the player in a reasonable fashion, though. Expect to restart scenarios often, as previously unexplained mechanics bite you in the ass. Don't think that completing the tutorial prepares you for the rigors of governance – you'll learn how to read the interface and place buildings, but that's about it. Tropico 3 is a *hard* game, even for experienced city builders. It never feels unfair, though, and restarting a level from time to time is hardly the end of the world.

The expected sandbox mode complements Tropico's excellent campaign, and it's exactly what you'd expect. All told, one could happily spend as much time here as with any top-shelf simulation or strategy game. Anyone who is willing to deal with the game's imposing impenetrability will be well rewarded. » **Adam Biessener**

More big, beautiful Tropico 3 screenshots are available for perusal at www.gameinformer.com/mag

eeding
he Masses

he campaign's many sce-
arios offer varied challenges
ithin Tropico's massively
omplex set of interrelated
ystems. One mission sees
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ith a city to feed. You can
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uild up a fish and livestock
ood economy (and very pos-
bly go broke in the process),
r accept an offer of humani-
arian aid. Letting those dirty
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oil is a slap in the face to the
ationalistic and military fac-
ons of your people, though.
hus, a stream of refugees is
eeking asylum in your coun-
y – more mouths to feed,
ut you'll look like quite the
utocratic bastard if you close
our borders. The constant
ressures to make money by
xporting goods and to offer
etter churches, schools, and
edical care never relent
uring any of these crises.

Gran Turismo

GRAN TURISMO NOT SUITED FOR THE PSP

7

PSP

» **Concept**
This game's structure makes racing easy for casual fans while not alienating hardcore car collectors

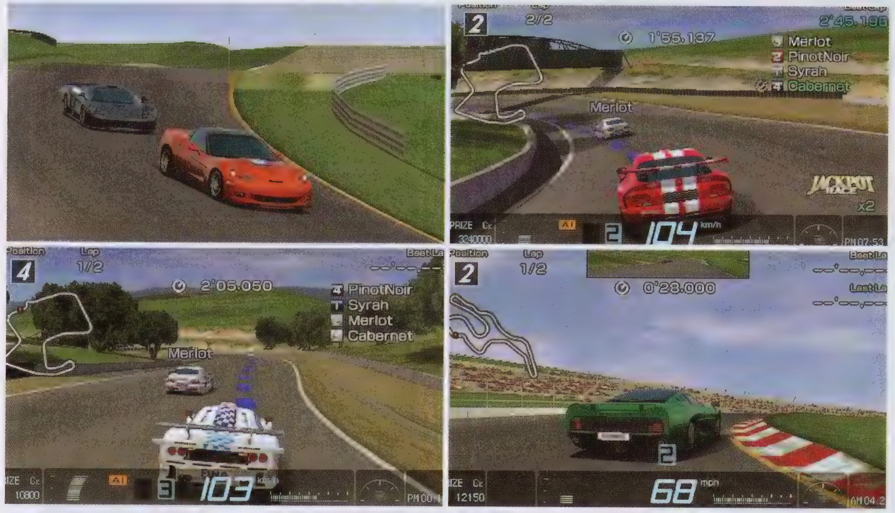
» **Graphics**
Environmental pop-up is an issue, and the sense of speed isn't great, but the handheld more or less keeps up with the franchise's high standards in its own way

» **Sound**
The game replicates car sounds with a good fidelity, retaining the authenticity of the series. There is also a cheesy announcer who is thankfully used sparingly

» **Playability**
I couldn't find a control setup I liked because the buttons on the PSP aren't capable of subtlety in braking or accelerating

» **Entertainment**
Gran Turismo's open format will please many, but this handheld just can't handle the sim-racing this series demands

» **Replay Value**
Moderately High



Style 1-Player Racing (4-Player Local) **Publisher** Sony Computer Entertainment **Developer** Polyphony Digital **Release** October 1 **ESRB** E

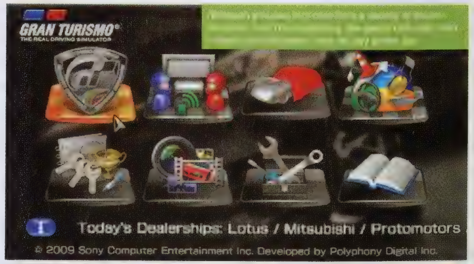
Gran Turismo has never been known for its accessibility, but that changes with the franchise's move to the PSP – and not just because you can take it with you wherever you go. A completely open career structure – if you can still call it that – is one of the changes that shakes this series to its foundation. While that may sound inviting to those who think that's exactly what Gran Turismo needs, this version's inability to do the franchise justice is exactly where I think it gets into trouble.

Gran Turismo has never had a scintillating career structure, and by doing away with it entirely, this PSP edition has its advantages. Instead of slowly stringing you along with crap cars and restricting which events you can enter early on, this GT throws its garage doors and track selection wide open from the beginning with an easy flow of credits that makes cars relatively easy to come by. As for the events... what events? Gone are the four-wheel-drive-only contests and other car/model requirements. Now you simply pick a track and car, and then choose whether you want to race in a solo time trial, against three other cars (yes, only four cars per race), or in a drift challenge. Collect your credits after the race, buy a new car, and do it all over again. This is about as sexy as choosing whether you want your potatoes in mashed or fry form. Should you tire of this – and you quickly will – you can always earn credits by completing racing challenges which are akin to the series' old license tests. I've never been a fan of those, so I'm not diving into them now, not even for the easy money.

The game makes itself more accessible in other ways, such as letting friends trade or share cars, multiplayer balancing features such as giving lesser players better cars, random credit jackpots, and the ability for the AI to race for you. But no matter how much these features open up the game, I miss having a bona fide career mode. While I have my criticisms of how dry Gran Turismo's career modes have been in the past, this GT swings the pendulum too far in the other direction. The game's lack of focus makes it feel just a step above the demo-like Gran Turismo Prologue series.

This new career mode has its strengths and weaknesses, but the one unfortunate thing about Gran Turismo that seals the deal for me is the driving itself. You'd think GT would have its one calling card dialed in, but it doesn't. Because of the small degree of movement in the PSP's triggers and face buttons, the game's acceleration and braking is very binary – either it feels like you're not on the pedals at all or you're slamming them to the car floor. This makes gently braking into corners nearly impossible, and acceleration with high-powered or rear-wheel drive cars can easily devolve into a fishtail-fest. The best I could do was to move the button assignment of the gas and brake to the triggers and then tap them like crazy. The subtleties of braking and acceleration is one of the founding pillars of the entire franchise, and it's not executed correctly here. The game's steering is also a little jerky due to the sensitivity setting and limited range of movement of the analog nub.

It's easy to feel like you're a kid in the candy store with GT's open format, but this edition of the franchise has none of the sweet, satisfying racing that has been its hallmark. » **Matthew Kato**



Today's Dealerships: Lotus / Mitsubishi / Protomotors

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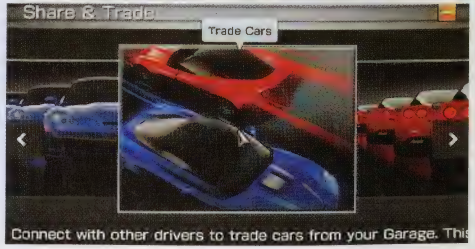
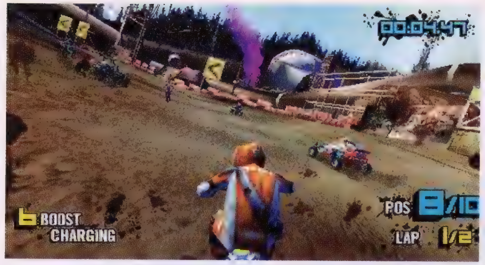


Connect with other drivers to trade cars from your Garage. This



MotorStorm Arctic Edge

DEBUT PSP MOTORSTORM SLIPS ON ICE

7

PSP

» Concept
You can now take MotorStorm with you where ever you go, but this game ultimately takes you in circles

» Graphics
The PSP's small screen retains many of the series' visual touches. It's still small, however

» Sound
Soundtrack features Radiohead, Chemical Brothers, and Queens of the Stone Age. The game also has a custom soundtrack option

» Playability
Racing on the PSP is pretty smooth. Although the vehicle differences come through, the track terrain – whether on ice or not – largely feels the same

» Entertainment
This game may be based on a bunch of adrenaline-junkie racers, but my heart rate never did much. Has the series flatlined?

» Replay Value
Moderate

Style 1-Player Racing (8-Player Local or Online) **Publisher** Sony Computer Entertainment **Developer** Bigbig Studios **Release** September 29 **ESRB** T

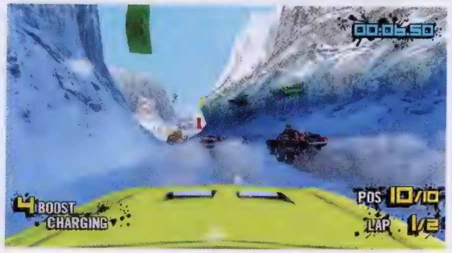
MotorStorm's relocation to the arctic tundra keeps it mired in ice, as it doesn't bring the franchise forward in any way. It does, however, present a good handheld version of the series' fundamentals.

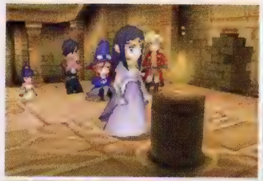
The big new feature in Arctic Edge is customized rides, but since the vehicles are already balanced by their class, these customizations are purely cosmetic. That being said, I was impressed with the options available, which reminded me of games like Pure or the MX vs. ATV series in that you're changing the color and style of all kinds of parts, like sprockets, suspensions, and lights. There's even a handy randomize feature.

These parts are awarded after races for a job well done, and the game also offers 50 in-game badges. These prizes, however, feel hollow after you've just completed another cookie-cutter race. Developer Bigbig Studios' maps replicate the franchise's classic style, with long courses, a contrast of high and low paths that suit different vehicle classes, and shortcuts. Arctic Edge introduces collapsible bridges and avalanches (initiated by the bigger vehicles), but these additions are not enough to take the game to that next level. If anything, I was surprised at how much I didn't notice them. The steady diet of the same basic race type didn't do anything to spice this game up either.

Arctic Edge looks good for MotorStorm's first appearance on the PSP, but gone are the days when I can be impressed with simply squeezing down a console title intact onto a handheld. Let's ask for more so we can get more. » **Matthew Kato**

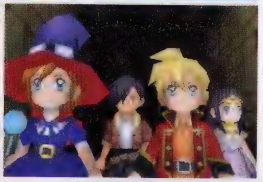
Pick up tips straight from the MotorStorm: Arctic Edge dev team and view a dozen track maps at www.gameinformer.com/mag





Shining Blade

Buster Shot



Nostalgia

CHOKING UP OVER THE CLASSICS

8

DS

» Concept
The guys behind the FFIII & IV remakes write a thesis on why old school RPGs are still fun

» Graphics
The charming anime-inspired art captures the spirit of this turn of the century adventure

» Sound
A great synth score helps set the backdrop for an epic after-school adventure

» Playability
Nostalgia exudes plenty of old-school charm, from its turn-based combat right down to the humorous dialogue from everybody in the town

» Entertainment
Nostalgia is the perfect portable adventure for those who grew up on 16-bit RPGs

» Replay Value
Moderate

Style 1-Player Role-Playing Game **Publisher** Ignition Entertainment **Developer** Matrix Software **Release** October 10 **ESRB** E10+

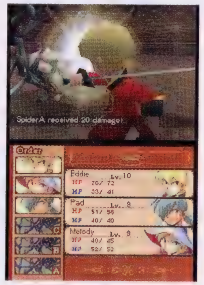
Nostalgia is an appropriate name for this game, since playing it summons wistful memories of 16-bit RPGs. The game is a sentimental homage to the classics of yesteryear: airships with 40-foot swords attached to their bow, young kids on a world-changing adventure, and level grinding until you're blue in the face.

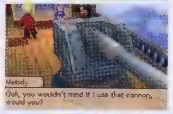
Set in a 19th century alternate reality, Nostalgia is what our history might have looked like if magic and supernatural monsters existed. When a fedora-wearing adventurer goes missing, his son Eddie takes up the mantle of globetrotter and tries to pick up his father's trail. That adventure spans the general foppery of Victorian London to the jazzy avant-gardism of New York.

This wouldn't be an homage to classic RPGs without lots of random battles. This is about as refined as turn-based combat can get. A turn queue similar to the one in Final Fantasy X helps you keep track of the attack order so you can plan your assault of melee combat, magic, and co-op attacks. If you get tired of the on-foot action, airship battles let you put that giant sword to use. While I liked the idea of fighting off giant dirigibles and managing incoming attacks from all sides, in practice these sequences merely feel like a different form of the regular turn-based combat. I wish developer Matrix Software had mixed it up a bit more.

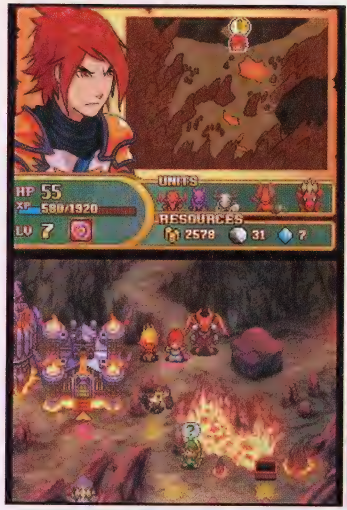
An RPG this entrenched in classic sensibilities was bound to fall into a few of the traditional tropes. At times, the narrative is as deep as the shallow end of a kiddy pool, and the dungeon exploring and level grinding grow old. Despite these complaints, Nostalgia is a worthy distraction. Anyone with a fondness for old-school RPGs would be remiss to pass it by. » **Ben Reeves**

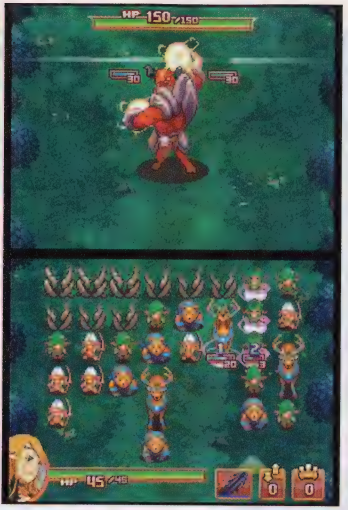
To view Nostalgia gameplay footage, concept art, and character bios, head over to www.gameinformer.com/mag


SpiderA received 20 damage!


Melody
Ooh, you wouldn't mind if I use that cannon, would you?

Maverick received 10 damage!





Might & Magic: Clash of Heroes

VENERABLE MIGHT & MAGIC SERIES GETS A SURPRISINGLY FUN, KID-FRIENDLY DS SPINOFF

Style 1-Player Puzzle/RPG (2-Player Local) **Publisher** Ubisoft **Developer** Capybara Games **Release** October 27 **ESRB** E10+

Clash of Heroes has little to do with any previous Might & Magic titles other than sharing some unit types and its general mythology, but that's all just ancillary fluff anyway. The new match-three gameplay style is unique and engaging, if less supported by content than I'd like.

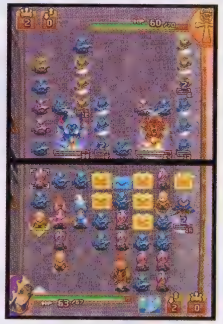
A selection of fantastical troops in three colors drops onto your play field to start off a match. You have three moves per turn to transmute this random layout into something useful. Columns of three link together and start charging for an attack, while rows of three or more merge into defensive walls. Your ultimate goal is to reduce your enemy's life to zero via attacking him with linked columns, but he has just as many opportunities to do unto you.

This basic mechanic works astoundingly well. You're constantly trying to adapt to the random layout, as well as making the most efficient use of your limited moves. A lot of depth is added via multi-space Elite units and by combining like-colored stacks to create more powerful attacks. I was continually surprised to find one more layer of strategy after another in my time with Clash of Heroes.

As enamored as I am of the gameplay, the structure outside of individual matches is almost enough to put this one on the shelf. The sad excuse for a campaign is bad even by kids' game standards; the story and writing are worse than Sonic games, the stupid unique goals in battle work against the gameplay design, and the limited progression aspects are not compelling in the slightest. Multiplayer is barely a curiosity, consisting as it does solely of local-only single battles.

Clash of Heroes is at once a pleasant surprise and a disappointment. I came in expecting nothing, and ended up having a pretty good time exploring the battle system's many nuances. Once I got hooked on the game, I was left wanting a reasonably decent context for the combat. Better this than the disgrace to a beloved franchise I expected, though. » **Adam Biessener**

Curious about how existing Might & Magic units map to the grid? Visit www.gameinformer.com/mag



7.75

DS

» Concept
Battle fantasy armies… by matching up columns of same-colored units

» Graphics
The anime-inspired art style is a terrible fit for the franchise, and reeks of some marketing VP insisting that this is what kids these days are into

» Sound
Several music tracks from Heroes of Might & Magic V are reproduced rather well, but I still prefer playing with the volume off

» Playability
The stylus control is horrible, but the traditional option works perfectly

» Entertainment
This isn't the next Puzzle Quest, but there's a capable little puzzler at the heart of what looks on the surface to be kid-oriented spinoff garbage

» Replay Value
Moderate

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PLAYSTATION 3

Game	Score	Issue
50 Cent: Blood on the Sand	8	Apr-09
Batman: Arkham Asylum	9.5	Sep-09
Battlefield 1943	8.5	Aug-09
Beatles: Rock Band, The	8.75	Sep-09
Bigs 2, The	7	Aug-09
Bionic Commando	6.25	Jun-09
BlazBlue: Calamity Trigger	7.75	Jul-09
Call of Juarez: Bound in Blood	8	Aug-09
Chronicles of Riddick: Assault on Dark Athena, The	9.5	May-09
Damnation	3	Aug-09
Dirt 2	8.5	Oct-09
Dynasty Warriors 6 Empires	6.25	Sep-09
Fight Night Round 4	9	Aug-09
Fuel	7.75	Jul-09
G-Force	7.75	Sep-09
G.I. Joe: The Rise of the Cobra	3.5	Sep-09
Ghostbusters	8	Jul-09
Godfather II, The	5.5	May-09
Guitar Hero 5	8.5	Oct-09
Guitar Hero Smash Hits	8	Aug-09
Guitar Hero: Metallica	8.75	May-09
H.A.W.X.	8.75	Apr-09
Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince	7	Sep-09
Heroes Over Europe	6.5	Oct-09
Ice Age: Dawn of the Dinosaurs	6.5	Sep-09
Infamous	9	Jun-09
King of Fighters XII, The	7	Sep-09
Madden NFL 10	8.75	Sep-09
Major League Baseball 2K9	7.25	Apr-09
MLB 09: The Show	9	Apr-09
NCAA Football 10	8.5	Aug-09
Need for Speed: Shift	8	Oct-09
NHL 10	9.25	Oct-09
NHL 2K10	5.5	Oct-09
Overlord II	6.5	Aug-09
Prototype	7.25	Aug-09
Red Faction: Guerrilla	9	Jul-09
Resident Evil 5	9.5	Apr-09
Sacred 2: Fallen Angel	7.75	Jun-09
Sonic's Ultimate Genesis Collection	8	Apr-09
Stormrise	4	May-09
Terminator Salvation	5.5	Jul-09
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 10	8.5	Jul-09
Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen	6.25	Sep-09
UFC 2009 Undisputed	8	Jun-09
Virtua Tennis 2009	7	Sep-09
Watchmen: The End is Nigh	5.5	Sep-09
Wet	7.5	Oct-09
Wheelman	8.5	May-09
Wolfenstein	7.25	Oct-09
WWE Legends of WrestleMania	8.5	May-09
X-Men Origins: Wolverine	8	Jun-09

XBOX 360

Game	Score	Issue
50 Cent: Blood on the Sand	8	Apr-09
Batman: Arkham Asylum	9.5	Sep-09
Battlefield 1943	8.5	Aug-09
Battlestations Pacific	6	Jul-09
Beatles: Rock Band, The	8.75	Sep-09
Bigs 2, The	7	Aug-09
Bionic Commando	6.25	Jun-09
BlazBlue: Calamity Trigger	7.75	Jul-09
Call of Juarez: Bound in Blood	8	Aug-09
Chronicles of Riddick: Assault on Dark Athena, The	9.5	May-09
Damnation	3	Aug-09
Dirt 2	8.5	Oct-09
Dynasty Warriors 6 Empires	6.25	Sep-09
Eat Lead: The Return of Matt Hazard	7	Apr-09
Fight Night Round 4	9	Aug-09
Fuel	7.75	Jul-09
G-Force	7.75	Sep-09
G.I. Joe: The Rise of the Cobra	3.5	Sep-09
Ghostbusters	8	Jul-09
Godfather II, The	5.5	May-09
Grand Theft Auto IV: The Lost and Damned	9	Apr-09
Guitar Hero 5	8.5	Oct-09
Guitar Hero Smash Hits	8	Aug-09
Guitar Hero: Metallica	8.75	May-09
H.A.W.X.	8.75	Apr-09
Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince	7	Sep-09
Heroes Over Europe	6.5	Oct-09
Ice Age: Dawn of the Dinosaurs	6.5	Sep-09
King of Fighters XII, The	7	Sep-09
Madden NFL 10	8.75	Sep-09
Major League Baseball 2K9	7.25	Apr-09
NCAA Football 10	8.5	Aug-09
Need for Speed: Shift	8	Oct-09
NHL 10	9.25	Oct-09
NHL 2K10	5.5	Oct-09
Ninja Blade	7.5	Jun-09
Overlord II	6.5	Aug-09
Prototype	7.25	Aug-09
Red Faction: Guerrilla	9	Jul-09
Resident Evil 5	9.5	Apr-09
Sacred 2: Fallen Angel	7.75	Jun-09
Section 8	6.5	Oct-09
Sonic's Ultimate Genesis Collection	8	Apr-09
Stormrise	4	May-09
Terminator Salvation	5.5	Jul-09
Tiger Woods PGA Tour10	8.5	Jul-09
Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen	6.25	Sep-09
UFC 2009 Undisputed	8	Jun-09
Velvet Assassin	5.25	Jul-09
Virtua Tennis 2009	7	Sep-09
Watchmen: The End is Nigh	5.5	Sep-09
Wet	7.5	Oct-09
Wheelman	8.5	May-09
Wolfenstein	7.25	Oct-09
WWE Legends of WrestleMania	8.5	May-09
X-Men Origins: Wolverine	8	Jun-09

Wii

Game	Score	Issue
Bigs 2, The	7	Aug-09
Boom Blox Bash Party	8.75	Jun-09
Broken Sword: Shadow of the Templars – Director's Cut	7	Jun-09
Conduit, The	7	Aug-09
Dead Space: Extraction	7	Oct-09
Excitebots: Trick Racing	8.5	Jun-09
Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles: Echoes of Time	7.75	Apr-09
G-Force	7.75	Sep-09
G.I. Joe: The Rise of the Cobra	3.5	Sep-09
Ghostbusters	6.5	Jul-09
Grand Slam Tennis	7	Jul-09
Guitar Hero Smash Hits	8	Aug-09
Guitar Hero: Metallica	8.75	May-09
Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince	7	Sep-09
House of the Dead: Overkill, The	8.5	Apr-09
Ice Age: Dawn of the Dinosaurs	6.5	Sep-09
Indiana Jones and the Staff of Kings	5	Jul-09
Klonoa	7	Jun-09
Let's Tap	5.5	Jul-09
Little Kings's Story	8	Jul-09
Madden NFL 10	6	Sep-09
Madworld	9	Apr-09
Major League Baseball 2K9	7.25	Apr-09
Major Minor's Majestic March	3	May-09
Metroid Prime Trilogy	9	Oct-09
Muramasa: The Demon Blade	7.75	Oct-09
New Play Control Mario Power Tennis	8.25	Apr-09
New Play Control Pikmin	8	May-09
Overlord: Dark Legend	7.5	Aug-09
Professor Heinz Wolff's Gravity	6.75	Jul-09
Punch-Out!!	9	Jun-09
Sonic and the Black Knight	5	May-09
Tiger Woods PGA Tour10	8.5	Jul-09
Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen	5	Sep-09
Virtua Tennis 2009	7	Sep-09
We Ski & Snowboard	6.75	May-09
Wii Sports Resort	7.5	Sep-09

PLAYSTATION 2

Game	Score	Issue
Guitar Hero Smash Hits	8	Aug-09
Guitar Hero: Metallica	8.75	May-09

PC

Game	Score	Issue
BattleForge	6	May-09
Battlestations Pacific	6	Jul-09
Call of Juarez: Bound in Blood	8	Aug-09
Chronicles of Riddick: Assault on Dark Athena, The	9.5	May-09
Codename: Panzers – Cold War	6	May-09
Company of Heroes: Tales of Valor	7.5	May-09
Cryostasis	8	Jul-09
Damnation	3	Aug-09
Demigod	8	Jun-09
East India Company	7	Sep-09
Empire: Total War	9.5	May-09
Godfather II, The	5.5	May-09
Heroes Over Europe	6.5	Oct-09
Section 8	6.5	Oct-09
Sims 3, The	9	Jul-09
Velvet Assassin	5.25	Jul-09
Wolfenstein	7.25	Oct-09

NINTENDO DS

Game	Score	Issue
Avalon Code	7	May-09
Dark Spire, The	7	May-09
Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles: Echoes of Time	7.75	Apr-09
Fire Emblem: Shadow Dragon	7.75	Apr-09
Flower, Sun, and Rain	5.5	Jul-09
Gardening Mama	6.5	May-09
Grand Theft Auto: Chinatown Wars	9.25	May-09
Henry Hatsworth in the Puzzling Adventure	7	Apr-09
Kingdom Hearts 358/2 Days	8	Oct-09
Knights in the Nightmare	7	Jun-09
Legend of Starfy, The	7	Aug-09
LEGO Battles	7.5	Jul-09
Mario & Luigi: Bowser's Inside Story	8.75	Oct-09
My Pet Shop	5	May-09
Peggle: Dual Shot	8.25	May-09
Pokémon Platinum	8.5	Apr-09
Professor Heinz Wolff's Gravity	5.5	Jul-09
Professor Layton and the Diabolical Box	8.25	Oct-09
Puzzle Quest: Galactrix	8.25	Apr-09
Rhythm Heaven	7.5	May-09
Scribblenauts	8.75	Oct-09
Shin Megami Tensei: Devil Survivor	8	Jul-09
Shin Megami Tensei: Persona	8	Oct-09
Tokyo Beat Down	7	May-09

PSP

Game	Score	Issue
Dissidia: Final Fantasy	6.5	Sep-09
Pangya: Fantasy Golf	7	Sep-09
Patapon 2	7	Jun-09
Prinny: Can I Really Be The Hero?	8	Apr-09
Resistance: Retribution	8.75	May-09
Rock Band Unplugged	8	Jul-09
Soulcalibur: Broken Destiny	7.5	Oct-09
Star Ocean: Second Evolution	7	Feb-0

8 | Need for Speed: Shift

Platform PS3 • 360 **Release** September 15 **ESRB** E **Issue** Oct '09

This game goes from 0-to-60 fast enough, but that only brings it upon the question of "now what?" that much more quickly. I don't want to say that being a sim-racer is a dead end, but it's hard to know where the Shift branch of Need for Speed can go from here.

8.25 | Professor Layton and the Diabolical Box

Platform DS **Release** August 24 **ESRB** E10+ **Issue** Sep '09

Diabolical Box sticks with the first game's formula almost exactly, and while it may not be as fresh a concept, more story and puzzles is all the Layton series needs in a direct sequel.

the score

8.25 | Space Invaders Extreme 2

Platform DS **Release** October 19 **ESRB** E

Space Invaders Extreme 2 is more fun shooter action, so if you liked the first one you should grab this. It's still only $20. It's just too bad that PSP and Xbox Live Arcade fans of the series are left in the lurch this time around.

URL: www.gameinformer.com/mag

8 | Majesty 2

Platform PC **Release** September 29 **ESRB** T

Majesty 2 is a better designed game than the original in many respects – the balance is much improved, the interface is less horrible, and the economy model is vastly superior. However, it fails to project the kind of quirky charm that made the first title such a classic.

URL: www.gameinformer.com/mag

5 | Spyborgs

Platform Wii **Release** September 22 **ESRB** T

It's kind of annoying scanning every wall for secrets with a laser pointer, and unfortunately the game falls back on this mechanic for every puzzle in the game. I just wish this game would stay hidden on store shelves, because I can't imagine too many people walking home happy after this purchase.

URL: www.gameinformer.com/mag

7.5 | Mini Ninjas

Platform PS3 • 360 • Wii **Release** September 8 **ESRB** E10+

Filled with likable characters and a great art style, it's bound to be a lot of fun for the younger demographic. Most of the fun lies in the combat, as all of the playable ninjas handle uniquely. Minor annoyances pop up every once in a while, but not enough to seriously disrupt gameplay.

URL: www.gameinformer.com/mag

8.25 | Order of War

Platform PC **Release** September 22 **ESRB** T

As much as I'd like to hit Order of War with the "just another World War II game" stamp and move on, Wargaming.net actually managed to create a surprisingly exciting game.

URL: www.gameinformer.com/mag

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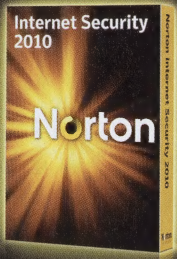

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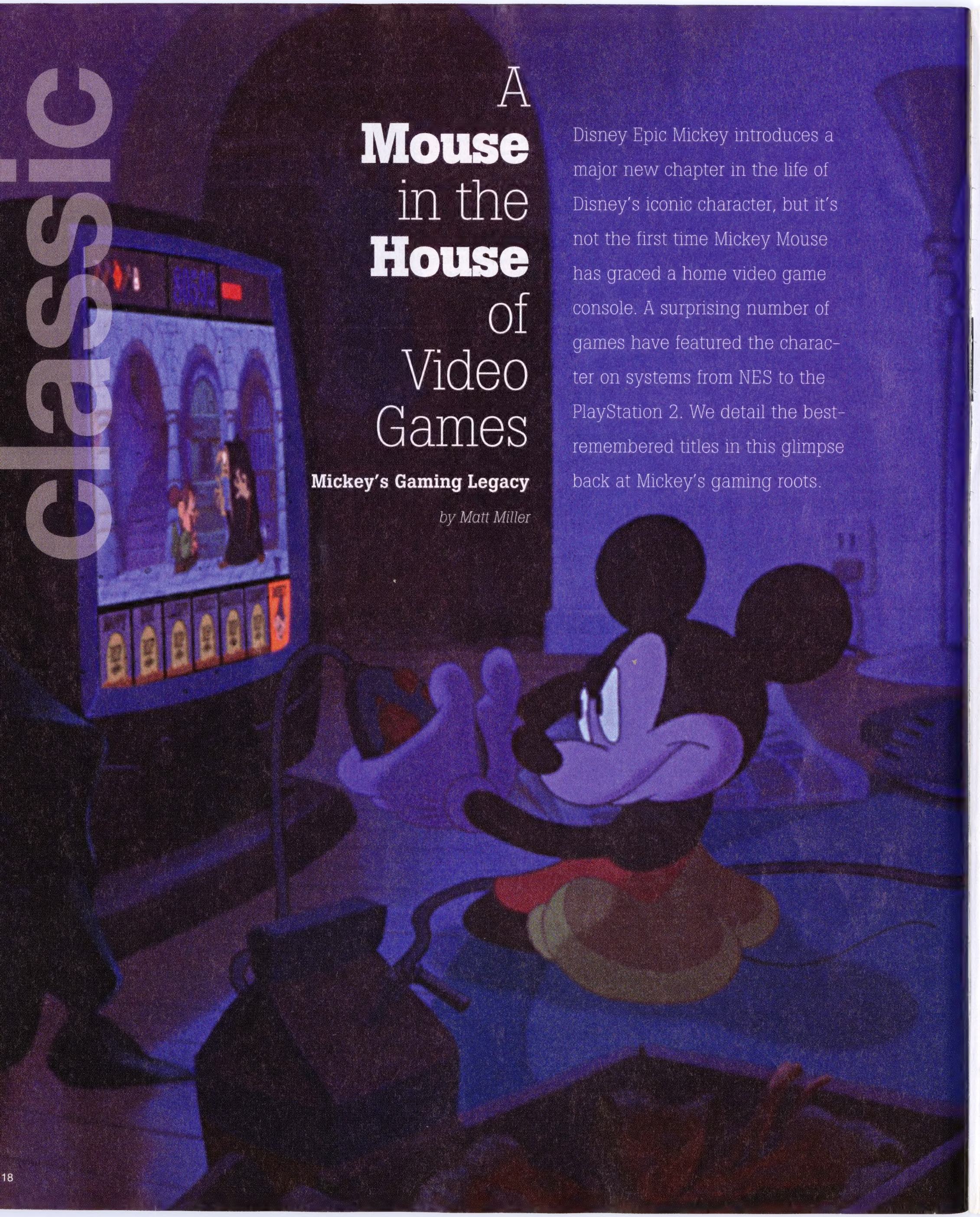
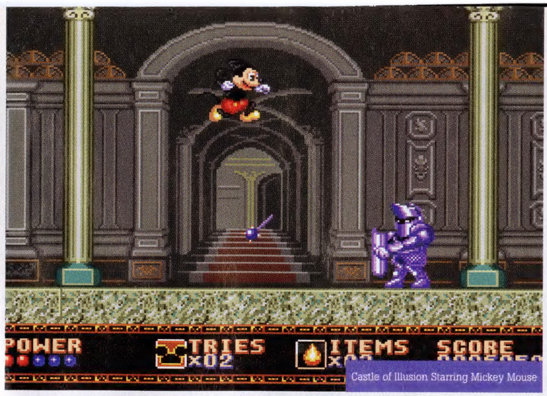


A Mouse in the House of Video Games

Mickey's Gaming Legacy

by Matt Miller

Disney Epic Mickey introduces a major new chapter in the life of Disney's iconic character, but it's not the first time Mickey Mouse has graced a home video game console. A surprising number of games have featured the character on systems from NES to the PlayStation 2. We detail the best-remembered titles in this glimpse back at Mickey's gaming roots.



Castle of Illusion Starring Mickey Mouse

1988 Mickey Mousecapade NES

Mickey's first adventure on home consoles had him and Minnie setting out on a far-flung adventure to rescue Alice, of Wonderland fame. The simple platformer differed from many of its contemporaries by including a second character, even if Minnie was rarely more than a tagalong companion who caused more harm than good. The game's moderate success prompted Capcom to move forward on plans for more titles starring the intrepid Disney characters.

1990 Castle of Illusion Starring Mickey Mouse Sega Genesis, Sega Master System

Mickey's appearances on Sega systems are undoubtedly the most fondly remembered by fans, especially this stellar platformer. The first in the Illusion series, Castle of Illusion's gorgeous animations brought Mickey's movements to life as he journeyed through a surreal magic castle to rescue girlfriend Minnie. Stepping through magic doorways, players found inventive and surprising levels – everything from a strange enchanted forest to a toyland of lifesize playthings. After gathering together the gems hidden throughout the stronghold, Mickey faced a final throwdown with Mizrabel the witch. The game was a huge success, spawning a Genesis sequel and two Game Gear follow ups (Land of Illusion and Legend of Illusion). Though not directly Mickey related, the series included an excellent offshoot starring Donald Duck entitled Quackshot.

1991 Fantasia Sega Genesis

Fancy graphics couldn't save this action/platformer created by Infogrames, in which Mickey reenacted his role from the classic cartoon musical. Control issues and a lack of any meaningful plot or character development left the game a pale imitation of the far better Illusion titles. When the demon Chernabog (from Night on Bald Mountain) steals the notes of the orchestra, Mickey, clad in sorcerer's apprentice robes, gives pursuit. The problematic game saved some face with a decent musical score – unsurprising, since the themes from Fantasia are some of the greatest classical works of all time.

1992 World of Illusion Starring Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck Sega Genesis

While the sequel to Castle of Illusion could be tackled alone, playing with a friend was a blast, especially given how few titles at the time offered dedicated cooperative features. Like its predecessor, World of Illusion had fantastic animations and smart, varied level designs. This time around, Mickey and Donald were whisked away in the midst of their illusion show into a place where magic was very real. Highlights of the game included magic carpet rides, floating through the sea in an enchanted air bubble, and a wealth of clever puzzles that required both players to work together, like using a seesaw to rocket one character up to a higher platform.

1992 The Magical Quest Starring Mickey Mouse SNES

Even as Sega fans basked in the excellent Illusion games, Nintendo gamers found a great alternative in The Magical Quest. The expected platforming gameplay was broken up by a clever costume changing mechanic. Mickey could don a magician's apparel to blast out magic, a firefighter's garb for an endless stream of water, or even climbing gear for scaling tough walls. The Magical Quest received two sequels, but the third installment didn't initially release outside of Japan. That game and its two predecessors were all remade years later as the Disney's Magical Quest series for the Game Boy Advance; those installments added Minnie and Donald as playable companions.

1994 Mickey's Ultimate Challenge SNES, Game Boy, Sega Genesis, Sega Master System, Game Gear

Sweeping across every imaginable platform, Mickey's Ultimate Challenge was targeted straight towards the younger set. It stands unique from most of the other Mickey Mouse video games as a puzzler, albeit an incredibly simple one. As kids investigated a castle in the troubled town of Beanswick, they encountered a few enigmas, from memory challenges to guessing games. Completing puzzles garnered magic beans, which in the end grew into (you guessed it) a beanstalk; at the top was a snoring giant – the source of the town's rumbling distress.

1994 Mickey Mania: The Timeless Adventures of Mickey Mouse SNES, Sega Genesis, Sega CD

Taking advantage of Mickey's massive backlog of movie appearances, Mickey Mania was a well-received early platforming release from Traveller's Tales, the company many gamers may recognize from the recent LEGO games. The game sent Mickey back into some of his greatest stories, including levels inspired by *Moose Hunters* (1937), *Lonesome Ghosts* (1927), and *The Prince and the Pauper* (1990). Like Junction Point's new Epic Mickey, Mickey Mania prominently featured the Mad Doctor, a crazy scientist first seen in the 1933 cartoon film named for the villain.

1994 The Great Circus Mystery Starring Mickey and Minnie SNES, Sega Genesis

By the time The Great Circus Mystery hit shelves, Capcom had a clearly delineated approach to its platforming Disney games. For this go around, Mickey and Minnie's date at the circus is set aside after Pluto and Donald go missing and the festive carnival atmosphere turns ugly. Co-op gameplay and strong visuals helped the game shine. However, it was the return of outfit changing that kept the game exciting throughout. The two mice could transform into the likes of a cowboy on a hopping wooden horse, or a sweeper with a powerfully sucking vacuum.

2000 Disney's Magical Mirror Starring Mickey Mouse Nintendo GameCube

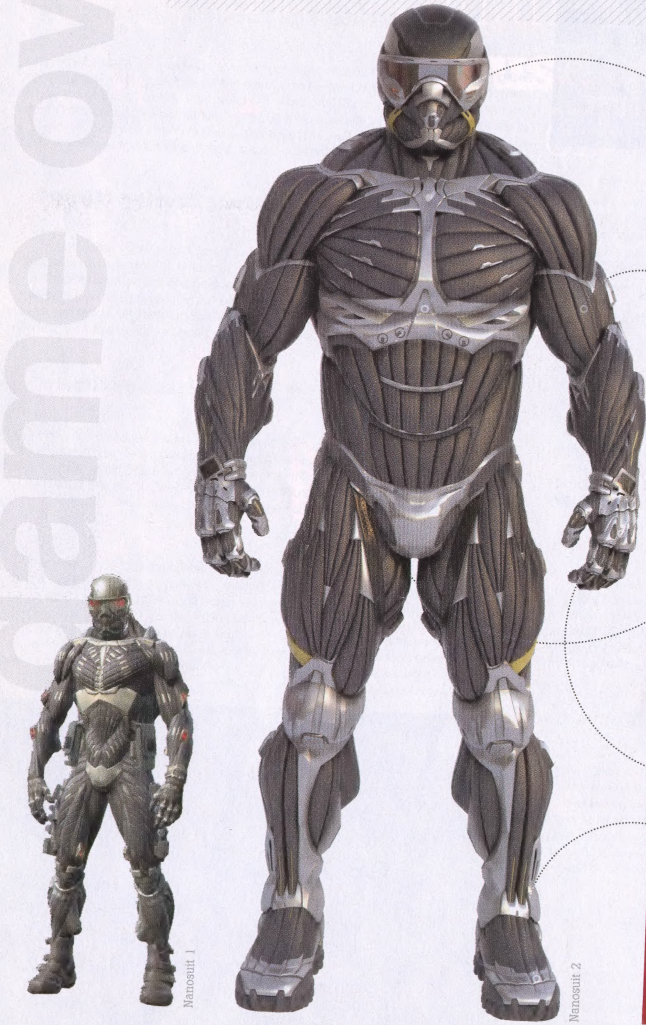
One of Mickey's most recent starring roles wasn't met with much success. This GameCube exclusive point-and-click adventure game fell prey to the worst of that genre's pitfalls, with few of its rewards. Drawn into a mysterious mansion through a magic mirror, Mickey sought out and combined items to break free of the house. Too-simple puzzles and incredibly slow-moving gameplay made the game boring for kids and adults alike.

2002 Kingdom Hearts PlayStation 2

Modern players most likely recall Mickey's video game adventures not from platforming run-and-jumps, but from Square Enix's sprawling role-playing adventure. King of his domain, Mickey spent most of the first game out of the spotlight as new hero Sora joined up with Donald and Goofy. The second installment of the series in 2006 put Mickey in a more significant role, as a ninja-like warrior for justice. Bearing a keyblade beside Sora, the two stood strong against the Heartless and helped save the scattered worlds. One of the second game's locales sent players reeling into a black and white world perfectly modeled after Mickey's first sound cartoon, *Steamboat Willie*.

NANOSUIT 2.0

In Crysis, the Nanosuit is more important than whichever dude happens to be inside. For the upcoming sequel, Crynet Systems has crafted the next generation of performance-enhancing battle armor. We spoke with Crytek executive producer Nathan Camarillo for the details. *(BV)*



Rebreather Assembly
Allows for short-term underwater breathing. In regards to the overall mask, Crytek maintained elements that pointed to the human underneath like the removable visor, breathing vents, and earholes.

CryFibril Artificial Muscle
Carbon/niobium nanofiber composite. "[On Nanosuit 1] there were muscle groups in places where they didn't support human motion, especially the abdominal region," Camarillo says. The new suit more closely resembles human anatomy.

Coltan-Titanium Exoskeleton
"If you look at the back of the first Nanosuit, it looks immobile, and he's very hunched – like a lobster almost." Camarillo says. "Here it looks like a spinal column. It's supported. It looks strong."

Gloves
These mix equal parts brute force and precision. The Crynet Systems brochure claims users can "punch through a concrete wall, then carry a china teacup across the battlefield."

Footwear
Camarillo calls the old suit's shoes "utilitarian boots" while the new ones are made for maneuverability and running.

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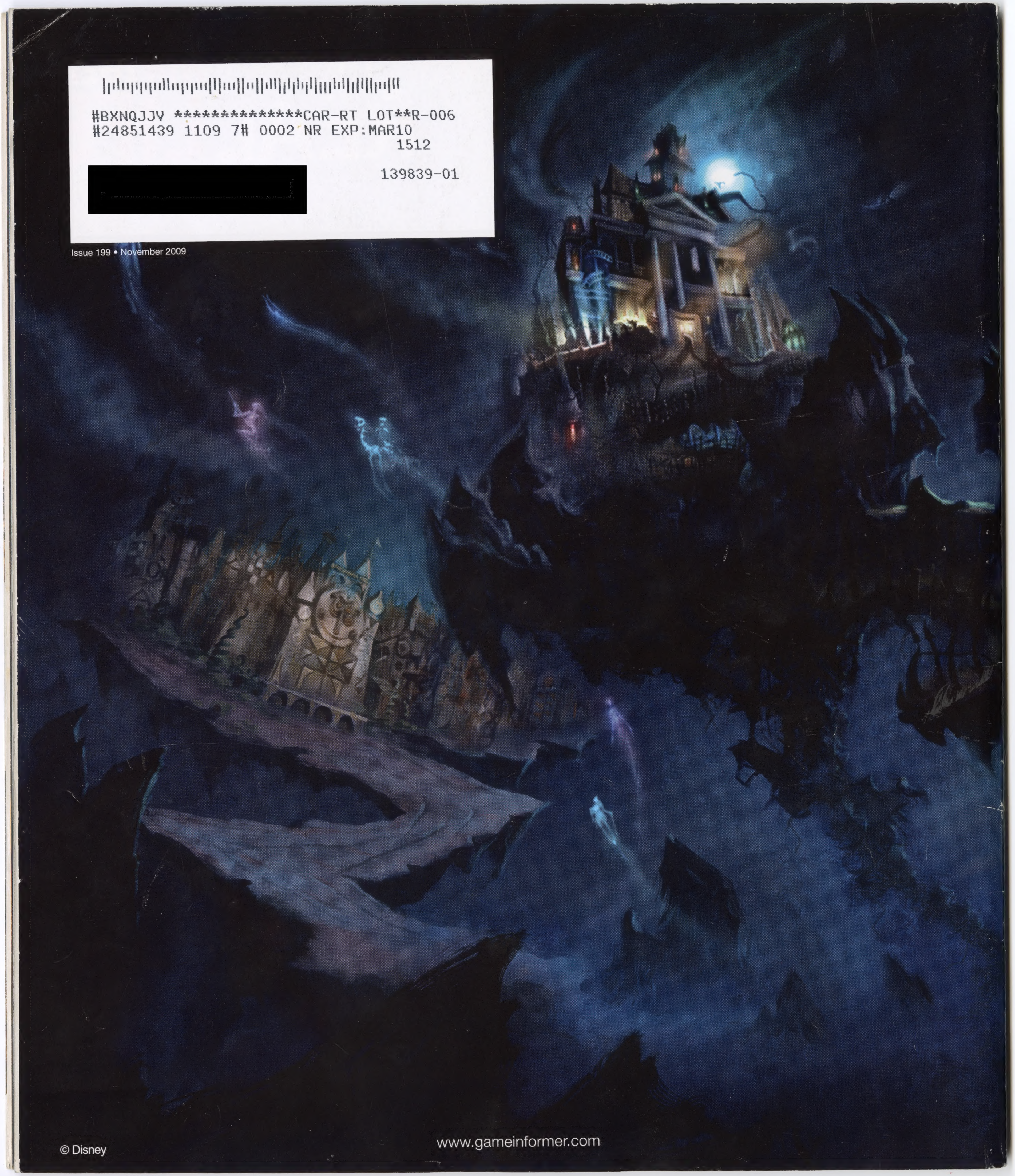

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